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Derek Coyle has published poems and reviews in the U.S., Britain and Ireland; in *Irish Pages*, *
The Texas Literary Review*, *Cuadrivio* (Mexico), *Wordlegs*, *The SHOp*, *Burning Bush 2*, *Glitterwolf*, *Skylight 47*, and *fathers and what needs to be said*. He has been shortlisted for the Patrick Kavanagh Award (2010, 2014), the Bradshaw Prize (2011), and in 2012 he was a chosen poet for the Poetry Ireland ‘Introductions Series.’ In 2013 he was placed second in the Bradshaw Prize. He currently lives in Carlow, Ireland, and he is a member of the Carlow Writers’ Co-Operative.
White Magic

Right after I saw you
with a new lover, dancing on the street,
those green boxers I’d bought showing above your jeans,
I consulted books of old magic
for a potion. I spent weeks
in moonlit visitation to a fox’s den,
a raven’s nest. I fasted, invoked jinn,
prepared nuts, herbs, a rabbit’s innards. I drank it
and my soul transmigrated
into a large white bloodhound.
I sniffed all you’d left behind:
aftershave, swimming trunks, boxers.
Filling my nostrils with your scent
I set off across fields, houses, hills.

I would find your new lover
and rip off his cock and balls.
As you cowered in the bed,
shaking beneath the sheets,
I thought better of it. I picked up
that pair of boxers we’d bought together,
that pair your new lover tore off you earlier,
and carried them home between my teeth.

They lie at the bottom of my wardrobe.
Another relic for your shrine.

—Derek Coyle
Around nine o’clock, the orange sky dissolved into a muddy sea of clouds, and night fell over the yard. Paper lanterns embossed with red, white, and blue flags flared to life on the patio. Guests circuated with lit candles, which they placed around the pool, the barbecue pit, and the dance area on the side of the house. Roger planted two Tiki torches at the back of the lawn, retreated inside, and reappeared carrying a box of fireworks. Through the darkness, two figures approached Seth and Martin at the top of the hill.

Clutching a glass in one hand, Christy said, “We looked all over for you.”

“How’s the work coming?” Beth asked.
“Not bad,” Martin replied.

“We should move down to the lawn,” Beth said. “You don’t want to miss the fireworks. Roger always puts on a good show.”

Martin stowed his script in his shoulder bag, and they clambered down the incline and stationed themselves in front of the torches, which gave off oily tongues of flame. Diana steadied the rocket launcher so Roger could pound it into the lawn with a wooden mallet. Wearing cut-off jeans and a white T-shirt knotted under her breasts, she appeared subdued—she’d switched on another personality. Roger mounted a candy-striped rocket into the launcher, and Diana retreated into the blackness that fell beyond the torchlight. When the torches sputtered flame in her direction, her closed eyes were cast heavenward, eyelids fluttering like moths.

“Friends, it’s time for the fireworks!” Roger announced.

A slow migration of people commenced from the house and front yard. Some guests picked up candles and used them to illuminate their way, like pilgrims heading to a shrine. When everyone assembled on the lawn, Roger said, “Beth and I would like to thank you for coming. This is the first time we’ve held the party in our new home. We hope you enjoyed the pool!”

The crowd whooped and whistled its approval.

“Without further ado,” Roger said, “let the fireworks begin!” He leaned over and lit the fuse on the candy-striped rocket, which lifted off with a whizzing sound and disappeared into the starless sky. Nothing happened, and a dissatisfied murmur passed through the crowd. The rocket suddenly burst into a galaxy of gold sparkles that expanded outward in several rings from its nucleus, and the startled guests dutifully applauded.

Roger positioned a rocket with “Red Devil” stenciled on its side into the launcher. He lit the fuse and the rocket took off, seconds later emitting a loud double-boom along with a hail of red sparks. As the fiery embers cascaded to earth, the backyard was bathed in an infrared glow. The guests cheered their approval. When the hooting died down, Roger said, “The Red Devil never fails to satisfy.”

“Just like you, Roger!” a woman’s voice cried out.

Martin nudged Seth and whispered, “You’ve got competition.”

Roger fired another missile, which burst into a halo of sapphires and diamonds. He launched two more rockets in quick succession, then said, “That about wraps up the main event. I’ve got one more rocket and some pinwheels you can nail to the trees at the top of the yard. As an accompaniment to the grand finale, Diana will hand out sparklers.”

Roger placed a red, white, and blue missile with “God Bless America” emblazoned across its nose into the launcher. Diana distributed sparklers and matches, and returned to his side. He told the crowd, “Light your sparklers and hold them overhead, like the Statue of Liberty.”

“That’s so goddamn hokey,” Richard yelled from across the yard.

“It’s only for effect,” Roger replied.

Diana slipped into a shut-eyed trance as Roger lit the fuse. The rocket rose into the air and, moments later, a deafening explosion filled everyone’s head with confusion. In the instant following the blast, a brilliant white light flashed across the sky, creating the impression of broad
An unexpected encounter with an otherworldly spirit at a holiday party in the Orenda Valley sends Seth Davis, a gay journalist from Manhattan, on a profound religious journey. Along the way, Seth stumbles into a quarreling coven of witches in the charming tourist town of Hope Springs, Pennsylvania, formerly known as Hell’s Ferry, and one of the most haunted destinations in America. As Seth learns more of the town’s remarkable history, he also uncovers his own shocking past, and in order to seek peace for his troubled soul, he must determine the fate of the coven, the town, and the entire Orenda Valley. True Religion, J.L. Weinberg’s debut novel, is a genre-bending fusion of paranormal horror, spiritual therapy, American history, and New Age enlightenment.

“Weinberg thoughtfully stitches together several different traditions—Christian, Celtic, Egyptian and Native American, in particular—into a synthesis that delves deep into the profound without becoming too new-agey. True Religion thus serves as an invocation to a new era of religious integration and earth revitalization. The effect is like getting breathlessly zipped through a haunted house in a spiraling cart while being schooled on (local) spiritual philosophy.”
—C. Todd White, Out in Jersey

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daylight. The effect lasted only seconds, but during the pulsing of the white light, time—and people’s hearts—stood still. A cold terror descended upon the crowd, as if they’d been transported to Hiroshima when the atomic bomb was dropped.

The night sky flashed brighter than day once again. As Seth’s eyes adjusted to the light, an image appeared before him of a man angrily approaching him. He moved through the night with force and fury, ready to attack. As the man reached Seth, he stretched out an arm, as if to grab Seth by the collar and pull him to the ground. Seth’s heartbeat quickened, but there was no pain, and just as fast as the man appeared, he vanished. Seth blinked, assuming his eyes and the light were playing tricks on him, but a stench hovered in the air around him. He looked down at his feet, thinking he stepped in something, but his sandals were clean. When he remembered how much he’d had to drink, and how bright the explosion was, he banished the notion of spectral hallucinations from his thoughts.

Time started up again as the rocket burst overhead, sending out red, white, and blue sparks that shot towards the heavens before gracefully falling through the warm night air. The explosion brought the guests back to their senses, a reminder that this was a homemade fireworks display, not an atomic blast.

“Hey, Roger, how’d you do that?” a voice called out.

“Trade secret,” Roger replied. He glanced at Diana, who looked like she was shaking off sleep. She gave him a cursory smile as her face twitched.

Murmurs of “I wonder how he did that?” and “That scared the shit out of me” ran through the gathering. A line of guests bearing candles meandered towards the house, the party’s mellow spell broken by the fearful explosion. “See you later, Roger,” some said, while others found Beth in the darkness and hugged her good-bye. Cries of, “Meet us at the inn in half an hour,” indicated the party would continue into the night.

Seth said to Martin, “Let’s find Richard and go.”

“Before Big Boy really blows something up,” Martin replied.

“I’ll check the yard,” Seth said. “You look in the house. I’ll meet you inside in ten minutes.” He waited until Martin had gone before approaching Roger, who was handing out pinwheels and sparklers to the remaining guests.

“What on earth caused that explosion?” Seth asked.

“What do you think of spirit calling now?” Roger said.

“I don’t believe a spirit caused that blast.”

“Of course a spirit caused it. I could never buy fireworks that powerful. Diana asked the fire elemental that lives in the yard to add a charge to the rocket. As you saw, the explosion was supernatural.”

“That’s one explanation. Anyway, thanks for an eye-opening party.”

Roger extended his hand. Seth shook it, and Roger drew him close and tried to kiss him. Seth wrestled himself free. “See ya,” he said shakily, stumbling towards the house.

Seth found Martin in the white-tiled kitchen chugging a beer, avoiding a circle of partiers sharing a joint. They walked through the darkened dining room and entrance hall into the candlelit living
room, which was populated by people standing in groups, drinks and cigarettes in hand. Two black-leather sofas were placed at diagonals in front of a stone hearth. Over the mantle, illuminated by votive candles, hung a painting of a sprite swathed in diaphanous drapery. Richard sat hunched over a bong on one of the sofas. He looked up at Seth in slow motion. “You’ve got to try this shit,” he croaked in a smoke-roughened voice. “It’ll blow your mind.”

“No thanks,” Seth said. “Are you about ready to go?”

A pained expression peeked through Richard’s beard. “I can’t believe you’re crapping out on me,” he said. He passed the bong to Martin, who rebuffed the offering. Turning to Seth, Richard cajoled, “Have a hit for the road then.”

“All right,” Seth said. “What harm can it do?”

Richard handed the bong to Seth and rasped, “Knock yourself out.”

Seth put his thumb over the carburetor hole, brought the bong to his lips, and sucked in the smoke, a mixture of high-grade marijuana and hashish. His lungs expanded, and he felt an instantaneous buzz as he exhaled. The perfect end to a surprising day, he thought, as his legs buckled. He handed the bong to Richard and collapsed onto the sofa.

“Are you okay?” Richard asked in a bleary voice.

Seth gave Richard a woozy look. He slumped against the back of the sofa and sank into the cushiony leather as both his stomach and his mind spun out of control. The room faded to black. When he came to seconds later, he said, “It’s time to go.” He stood up, only to fall back onto the sofa. He emitted a sickening gasp and spewed the contents of his stomach onto a coffee table littered with plastic cups, plates, crumpled napkins, and half-eaten hors d’oeuvres.

Beth, who was ushering guests out the front door, raced over. “Honey, what happened?”

“I’ll clean it up in a minute,” Seth said with a sickly grin.

“You’ll do no such thing. July Fourth isn’t complete until someone pukes. It’s like waiting for the Fat Lady to sing.” She ran to the kitchen and returned with a bucket and some rags. As she sopped the mess into the bucket, a stream of pale green liquid flew from Seth’s mouth, narrowly missing her. “That’s it, buster,” she said. “You’re obviously not capable of walking, and I won’t have you vomiting all over my car. You can sleep here on the futon.”

Seth was so nauseated he couldn’t object.

Beth retrieved a packet of incense from the mantelpiece, lit several sticks, and placed them in the potted plants around the room before taking the bucket into the kitchen.

“Do you mind if I leave?” Martin asked. “You’ll be fine here, right?”

“Go ahead,” Seth said sullenly.

“Meet me at Richard’s tomorrow and we’ll catch the noon bus back.”

“If I can walk.”

“Poor, poor boo,” Martin murmured. He and Richard said good-bye to Beth and left.

When the last of the guests departed, Beth said, “Let’s get your bed ready.” She unfolded a futon that was nestled in an alcove next to the hearth, and made it up with bedding from the hall closet. Roger walked through the living room and climbed the staircase to the second floor, avoiding
eye contact with Seth. Beth fluffed the pillows and surveyed the wreckage of her party. “I can’t deal with this mess tonight,” she said. “I’ll clean it up in the morning. There’s a bathroom off the front hallway. I left the light on.”

“Thanks,” Seth said. “I’m sorry I ruined your table.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll feel better in the morning.” Beth walked to the sofa and gave Seth a sisterly kiss on the forehead. “Sleep well.”

As Beth mounted the stairs, Christy materialized from the darkened dining room. “Where is everybody?” she asked.

“Where have you been?” Beth said, leaning over the railing.

“Looking at the stars,” Christy replied. “They finally came out.”

“Party’s over for this year, hon. Good night.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Christy said. She regarded Seth slumped on the sofa and slurred, “Looks like you had one too many drinky-poos,” before hurrying out the door.

Seth rose unsteadily, crossed the room and, without undressing, collapsed onto the bed. He rested his head on the pillow, which gave off the stuffy smell of a cedar closet, and relaxed into the futon pad. He closed his eyes and fell into a black vortex that swallowed him whole.

* 

Violent coughs woke Seth in the middle of the night. He opened his eyes, but couldn’t distinguish anything in the darkened room. A terrible hacking penetrated the gloom; Beth was making the choking sounds, as if her breathing had been cut short. She cried out, “Hester’s not here anymore!” followed by a silence so deadening it seemed that the pulse had gone out of the world.

An edgy awareness jolted Seth fully awake. His heart raced as something glided down the stairway from the second floor. He couldn’t see anything, but sensed an energy moving towards him. Then he smelled it. The acrid odor of burnt, dead leaves forced its way up his nostrils, singeing his mucous membranes and the back of his throat. The same smell he had detected earlier on the lawn. Tears sprang from his eyes, and he began to cough. The sulfurous scent was so sharp, so piercing, it seemed three-dimensional. *It’s not of this world,* he concluded before the burning stench expanded inside him, closing his windpipe. He thrashed about trying to catch his breath, and a heavy dampness that carried the smell of dank graveyard earth and rotting shrouds blanketed the room. *The walking dead,* he thought, as his heart beat faster.

The silent intruder drew nearer, its tingly electrical energy chilling Seth. The force field prickled his skin like a traveling patch of nettles. His body grew numb. He told himself, *Empty your mind. Think of nothing that will identify you.* But the thud of his heart pulsed wildly inside his chest, and his heartbeat could betray him. Lying paralyzed on the futon, there seemed to be no body of flesh and bone between his soul and the thing that was three feet away. *I’m dead if it finds me.*

The spirit force glided past him into the dining room. As the prickly energy dissipated, Seth lay motionless, terrified to move. Only when he relaxed his clenched muscles did he realize, *The alcohol’s been shocked out of my system. I’m sober. I’m awake. I didn’t dream this.* In a horrifying flash of intuition, he understood, *That was a ghost. An old, powerful ghost.* He sat
upright. *It was a man, the one I saw in the yard. And he was looking for something he couldn’t find.* He wondered if Beth could hear his thoughts and would pad downstairs to minister to her guest. But no light flashed on upstairs. *The stench is what made Beth choke. The spirit was upstairs with Beth, then down here with me. He became disoriented and left.*

Every nerve in his body was alive, and he jumped at the unfamiliar house’s creaks and groans. With eyes now accustomed to the dark, he scanned the room for movement. Nothing stirred, and he understood that the ghost wouldn’t return. He stifled a hysterical laugh at the idea of going back to sleep.

An hour later, as the dawn cast a pale light through the sheer curtains that hung at the living room windows, his eyelids grew heavy, and he sank into the sweat-drenched mattress. He drifted into his second sleep with a queasy feeling in his stomach. His nausea came from the thought, *The ghost was looking for me.*

J.L. Weinberg was born and raised in San Francisco. He moved to New York City to become a film critic, but was sidetracked by stints as a model and actor. He returned to movie journalism, writing for *New York, Premiere, The Village Voice, Interview, American Cinematographer, The Advocate,* and *The New York Native.* *True Religion* is his first novel.
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Stacy Brewster earned a BFA in Film & Television Production from NYU and worked professionally for many years in television and advertising production on both coasts. He facilitates workshops for Write Around Portland, a non-profit that provides free writing workshops for those without access to writing in community with others because of income, isolation or other barriers. Stacy’s short fiction and poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Gertrude Press, the Madison Review, the Santa Fe Literary Review, Plenitude Magazine, the Minetta Review, qu.ee/r Magazine, the Summerset Review, and other journals. He lives in Oregon with his husband.
Song of the Radical Faerie

In me is the song of the Radical Faerie:

his quicksilver talisman,
his naked shimmy at Rooster Rock,
his bendy body slipped into Breitenbush spring.

He beckons to me from the circle, his hair the color of sky,
and in a ritual I don’t yet understand
I lay before him my immutable characteristics—
unburdening my height, my weight,
my chromosomes and crooked pinkies,
my embarrassment at the length of my cock.

In the heart of his song, I release it all
until I am stripped before the moon of his body,
stomach fluttering with baby faeries.

I give myself over to the circle,
to daisies braided with our hair,
to holding hands with men in the shadows of our lives.

There had been another song, once,
in the tongue of my first kiss,
in the smell of leather in his muscled shoulder
back when shoulders were something to look over,
not admire as they are here, held taut to the sun
for the golden shawl, learning to believe in Faeries.

—Stacy Brewster
Steven Shaw climbed the steps to his third-floor apartment. The wood planks creaked under his feet, causing his footfalls to echo in the lobby below. It had been another long night of waiting tables and assisting in the kitchen at The Riviera on 29th Street in Manhattan. He hardly had the energy to reach the top of the staircase. If he didn’t get into bed soon he felt as though he’d collapse from exhaustion; working extended shifts had been grueling. He arrived at his apartment and began searching his jacket for keys. From the far end of the dimly-lit corridor Mrs. Bennett, a fifty-year-old insomniac, whistled, drawing Steven’s attention. He turned in her direction and smiled wearily. She waved at him. “Sleep well,” she said. “Add a few hours for me.” Mrs. Bennett’s voice was husky from her pack-a-day habit.
Shaw pulled off his coat and plopped onto his bed. The initiative to get undressed had diminished long before he hit the mattress; he just wanted to close his eyes and put an arduous night behind him. He fell asleep fully clothed. Thirty minutes later while in a sound sleep, the hourly chime on his watch chirped, waking him up. As he opened his eyes, a shaft of moonlight cut through his window. A garbage can could be heard tipping over on the sidewalk. A car sped past his apartment and he heard its tires screeching. No way could he sleep now, he’d never find a rhythm.

Steven sat up in bed and lit a cigarette—a two-year-old habit of his that he couldn’t shake, an addiction he picked up in the restaurant business. He had been trying to wean himself from the tobacco, but lacked will power and incentive. The nicotine high gave him a rush and kept him slim, a benefit he couldn’t resist. Reaching over to his night stand he turned on the lamp.

Now he had the urge to take a walk, so he put on sweatpants and a sweatshirt and began a leisurely stroll through the barren city streets. One thing Steven had always enjoyed about the night was the calm setting in, pouring over the night, the sensation as refreshing as a cool glass of water on a stifling day. Blinking lights were everywhere. He had the naked sidewalks of Brooklyn all to himself. On Tillary Street he passed a flight of cast iron stairs hanging from an apartment building just like his—this one, though, appeared to be some kind of brothel. Clear lights blinked over a picture of a shapely woman. Above the picture of the woman: Open 24 Hours For Your Pleasure. He laughed; then he turned the corner and began crossing over the Brooklyn Bridge.

The bridge—all 6,000 feet of it—looked gigantic, even at night. Lights lined the steel girders, the support beams overhead. Bulbs outlined the upper frames and side panels. As he strode the pathway which ran parallel to the right hand railing, he listened to his shoes clanging on the meshed metal. Not much traffic. The waves of the East River rolled peacefully under the placid glow of the moonlight. Ahead he came to a booth, a control room of sorts, a guard’s station. A dingy light bulb illuminated the interior, accenting scuff marks and fingerprints on the glass, as well as a mess of papers on the floor. In the corner of the booth on a metal table sat a phone, its base coated with a layer of dust and grime, the numbered buttons difficult to read. For a moment, Steven considered using the phone to call his boyfriend who lived downtown. Being alone on the bridge late at night just above flowing water and surrounded by bright lights put him in a peculiar mood.

He further appraised the booth and wondered if whoever had been there was going to return soon. The butt of a cigarette was still glowing in an ashtray, and a logbook was open with a pen tucked in the crease. Feeling daring, Steven picked up the phone and began dialing his boyfriend’s number. After four rings a man answered, a deep male voice. “Hello?”

“Martin?” Steven asked.

“Hey, Stevie. Were you thinking of me?”

“I—”

“You must’ve been. You’re not home, since I don’t recognize the number. There’s a lot of static too. Where are you?”

“Tell him,” a voice from behind Steven said.

Steven wheeled.

“Where are you, Stevie?” asked Martin. “Who are you with? Why are you with somebody else and calling me so late?”

Steven shuddered. A short, stocky, gray-haired man with a curly mustache and leather gloves stood before him. Caught off
guard, Steven kept silent. “Hang up,” the man said, pointing at the phone’s cradle.

Martin’s voice was still coming through the receiver. “Steven? What’s going on? Where are you?”

Steven hung up the phone. “Good,” the strange man said. “I don’t like distractions. It’s tough to think.”

Steven stood quietly. The man placed his gloved hand on his arm and patted it. “Don’t worry, I’m not here to hurt you. Besides, take a good look at me. Do I appear threatening… intimidating in any way?”

Steven was reluctant to answer. He shook his head. “Okay then,” the man said. “What are you doing here, young man? Why are you walking this bridge at this hour, in this city?”

“I couldn’t sleep. Who are you anyway? Some weirdo?” Steven started walking away.

“Someone you need to know,” the man said. “Someone who can change your life—for the better.”

Steven stopped in mid-stride but didn’t turn around. “Yeah right. Good night.”

“You may go of course, I won’t stop you,” the stranger said. “But if you’re looking to learn more about your future, I may know some things.”

“Nothing’s wrong with my life,” Steven responded.

“I never said there was.”

“So what’s your deal, old man?”

“Do you enjoy living in a dump, Steven? Do you like working all those hours at a restaurant just to bring home barely enough money to pay your bills?”

“Who the hell are you, man? Have you been following me?”

“Oh no, I’m not as creepy as you think. I’m actually quite harmless and private. I just know things, see things.”

“You in the mob or some twisted cult?” Steven asked.

“No, I’m not. But you could be part of something extraordinary if you can get past my rather unorthodox approach.”

“What’re you talking about? I don’t even know your name, or anything about you.”

“My name is Clarence. I visit this bridge when I’m beckoned.”

“And do what, Clarence? Scare people?”

“That’s not my intention. I pick someone whose energy demands my time—my gift.”

“What kind of gift?”

“The gift of sight.”

“I’m not blind, Clarence.”

“In some ways you are, Steven.”

“You’re way off base. And I don’t have time to listen to some drunk fortune teller or palm reader or whatever you are.”

“Would you like proof of my ability?”

“Now that you mention it, I would. I’m calling your bluff.”

“Fine. I welcome the opportunity to enlighten you.”

“Well, I’m waiting,” Steven said.

“In the morning you’re going to buy a pack of cigarettes, as you normally do.”

Steven, his jaw slack in astonishment, ran his fingers through his wavy hair. “How did you know—?”

Clarence held out his hand. “Please… let me finish.”

Steven stifled a laugh. “Fine.”

“When you purchase your cigarettes you will discover the proof you’re looking for. If
at that time you still doubt me...” Clarence started to leave. “Until tomorrow then.”

“But,” Steven said abruptly.

“No buts, Steven. Tomorrow’s another day. You’ll see.”

Steven watched Clarence go. He waited for him to disappear like a ghost but that did not happen. Clarence was real, every bit of him. Unusual, he thought—but real. Steven went home and called Martin before going to bed, giving him a brief account of what had happened. Martin was relieved that he was all right.

The next day he woke up early and, as always, he went to the corner store to buy cigarettes. He had to be at work by noon. Besides, being up early gave him the opportunity to take care of little things: laundry, grocery shopping, going through the previous day’s mail. Occasionally he would call his parents in Los Angeles.

“Pack of Newport Lights, please,” he said to the clerk.

The cashier reached for a pack of matches and threw them into the bag with his cigarettes. “That’ll be eight bucks.” Steven handed the clerk a ten-dollar bill and the cashier handed him his change. Without counting it, he stuffed the money in his pocket and left the store. Around the block a panhandler in the street spotted him and begged for money. Steven refused to give the homeless man any cash. “Leave me alone, okay. I don’t have any money. I’m just a waiter.”

“Bullshit, man. You got all kinds of dough on you.”

Annoyed and wanting to prove the man wrong, Steven pulled out the lining of his pockets. What he discovered was inconceivable: three hundred-dollar bills. “I told ya, man,” the panhandler said. “You’re rolling in it, and I’m hungry. I haven’t eaten in days.”

Steven stared at the bills in his hand in disbelief. How could this have happened? The clerk, Hendricks, is a bright guy. There’s no way he could have been mistaken. I have to go back and fix this. I don’t want him to get in trouble. Steven immediately returned to the store and waited for an opportunity to speak with the clerk. He looked around the store but did not notice a manager anywhere; he didn’t want any problems. When Hendricks was free, Steven went to the front desk. “Can I help you, Shaw?”

“You sure can,” Steven said. “Can we talk in private?”

“Sorry, we can’t. I’m not allowed to leave this register, but what is it you need?”

“I’d prefer to speak with you elsewhere, if you don’t mind.”

“Actually, I do mind. I have to stay put. Again, what can I do for you?”

Steven mumbled. “I bought a pack of smokes and handed you a ten-dollar bill.” He looked around the store discreetly to see if anyone was eavesdropping.

The cashier looked puzzled. “Well?”

Steven leaned over the counter. “You gave me three hundred-dollar bills back.”

“Are you sure, Mr. Shaw? My draw’s in good standing. Boss just checked it before going to the bank. As long as the big chief here’s not bitching about my work, you and I are cool.” The clerk winked at Steven.

Steven shook his head. “This can’t be right. I only gave you a ten.”

“I don’t know anything about it, I told ya,” the clerk said. “I really got to get back to work now. Boss catches me bullshitting and I’m up shit’s creek.”
Steven’s eyes were wide. “All right then. Thanks for your time. Sorry I bothered you.”

* * *

Sitting in bed, Steven pondered the oddness of his good luck. He had been to the store just about every day for the last few years and had dealt with the same clerk, yet this afternoon Hendricks acted oblivious to Steven’s explanation. Nobody just gives someone a particularly large unwarranted sum of money as change without being aware of it on some level. Did Clarence know the cashier in some way and put him up to something? Is this the help he was talking about? Most people would be curious about why they were given money for no reason, and what, if anything, was behind the extravagance. Was it good will? A scam? Steven didn’t know what to think or what to do next.

Later that night, Steven returned to the bridge to see if Clarence was there. He walked along the railings and checked the booth, but did not find the mysterious man. At this point, Steven was about to give up. Why keep searching for what he believed was probably some figment of his imagination, or some drifter who aimlessly roamed the city. As he began moving leisurely down the pathway back toward the heart of the city, he heard a voice behind him. “Leaving so soon, Steven? I came looking for you too.”

Steven stopped. He had just scanned both sides of the bridge and saw no one, then Clarence appeared from out of nowhere. What the hell is he? he wondered. “What’re you a ghost, Clarence? A magician? Do you live under this thing? What?”

“How can you be confused by my appearance?” With his own hands, Clarence patted down his body. “See? I’m human.”

Steven put his hands in his pockets. “That doesn’t mean much to me. What I want to know is, why—?”

Clarence interrupted. “Why did that man give you hundreds of dollars?”

Steven squinted. “Yeah.”

Clarence took a step toward Steven, his hands behind his back. “I don’t know why, Steven. I only knew he was going to give you the money. I’m not aware of the intentions behind it. Last time we met I saw a halo of luck around you… an energy, if you will; and I was certain about my vision.”

“You a fortune teller, Clarence? A mind reader?”

“No. But when I see things that can benefit someone—which happens rarely, by the way—I try to find them, tell them. You should be grateful.”

“About what? How bizarre you are?”

“No, Steven. You should be grateful that when you go home tonight you will receive a phone call, the subject of which will change your life. I’d rush home if I were you.”

As crazy as Steven thought the man and his musings were, he turned and made haste for home. When he arrived, he grabbed the phone off the table and brought it into the kitchen. He sat at the table, staring at the phone, waiting for it to ring. The clock hanging above the sink read two minutes past midnight. He pulled out the other chair and put his feet on it. With his fingers he rubbed the buttons of the phone as if he’d never seen them before; he treated them like delicate nipples. Across from him, standing on a table, was a calendar, with a note indicating that he was not required to work until three o’clock the next day, later than usual. He turned and glanced at the clock.
again: thirteen minutes past midnight. The phone still hadn’t rung.

Steven stood and began pacing the floor. A few minutes later when still nothing had happened, he walked over to the living room window and looked outside. He saw the immense *Kopenhagen Snuff* sign blinking against the building on the north end of the parking lot across the street. It was always flickering day after day, night after night. Down in the street, coming from around the corner, he saw Mrs. Bennett, the insomniac, heading home from her typical late-night stroll.

Time was going by so quickly and still nothing had happened—no phone call. He had become impatient and decided to take a shower. Just as he lathered up his body he heard the phone ring, or at least he thought he did. Immediately he turned off the water to focus on the noise. The apartment was silent, the phone not ringing. Perhaps he was hearing things. *Am I losing it?*

He rinsed the soap from his body, closed his eyes, and tried to enjoy the warm water beating down on him. But the image of Clarence was rushing through his mind. He quickly finished his shower and resumed waiting for the damn phone to ring. In some way he was a bit disappointed in himself for believing that Clarence had any control over his life or any special foresight. Maybe he was being manipulated by a con man. Steven had seen quite a few con men in his life—the restaurant was owned and operated, as others were, by crooked people and mobsters—but Clarence didn’t fit that mold or have that shady look.

He stepped out of the shower, got dressed, and then sat down on the living room couch staring at the walls. He had grown tired of waiting for the phone to ring. The only option he could think of now was to will it to ring. He went across the room and picked up the phone, then brought it over to the couch with him. With the phone in his lap, he fondled the buttons again, closed his eyes and wished for luck to strike another time. The waiting was maddening. *Come on, come on, come on... Damn it.*

The red light on the receiver flashed crimson as the phone finally rang. Despite his eagerness, Steven did not answer it right away. Instead he wanted, for some strange reason, to hear the sound of the jingle once or twice. He took a few deep breaths and picked up the phone on the third ring. “Hello?”

Nobody was there. “You son of a bitch,” he shouted and then slammed the phone down onto its cradle. “What the hell is wrong with me?” he cried out. He got up from the couch and paced the floor again, muttering incoherently to himself. He went to the refrigerator, pulled out a can of beer and drank it in one swig. When he was done, he squashed the can in his fist and whipped it into the sink. He was making himself crazy—or was this part of Clarence’s game?

The phone rang again...

Steven ran over to the table and answered it. “Hello,” he said, short of breath.

“Steven Shaw?” the voice responded.

“This is he,” he replied. He felt so anxious he could hardly contain himself, the receiver wobbled in his sweaty grip.

“My name is Wilkins Mortimer, I’m calling on behalf of Newport cigarettes. You’re a winner of the sweepstakes drawing you entered last year. We’ll need—”

Steven had forgotten that he entered the sweepstakes. “What did I win?” he interrupted rudely.

“I was getting to that. First things first, Mr. Shaw.”

“Okay.”
“How many packs do you smoke a week, we need this information for our records.”

For a few seconds Steven did not respond. Since meeting Clarence on the bridge, he hadn’t smoked a cigarette. “Are you there, Mr. Shaw?”

“Uh…oh…yeah… about a pack and a half a day, a…around… over ten packs a week that would be, right?” He was too nervous to think clearly, to calculate accurately.

“There’s no need to be exact, Mr. Shaw, it’s just part of our survey before a winner can collect the prize.” Steven couldn’t wait any longer to find out what he had won. “What the heck is my prize, man?”

“One more question first, Mr. Shaw.”

Anxious and impatient, Steven bit his lip. “What?” he asked.

“Do you want the two-hundred thousand in a lump sum or installments?”

The phone loosened in Steven’s trembling hand, his eyes widened, his mouth became dry, the response now caught in his throat. “I…I…want it all up front…soon…as soon as possible.”

The representative took his information, congratulated him and wished him luck. “Thank you for using our products. A check is in the mail.”

After hanging up, Steven peered at the clock: 2:00 a.m. He grabbed a sweater and, overwhelmed with excitement, ran to the bridge. Clarence’s visions were authentic, as real as the blood rushing through his veins right now. At the bridge he stood in front of the booth. He surveyed the north and south ends of the bridge, then stared east and west. His weird but clairvoyant friend was not around. As he walked along the bridge a car passed him, the tires moaned on the grates. The driver shouted at him. “Go home, drunk!” and then threw a cigarette out the window that almost struck his arm. He walked to the railing and looked out into the darkness, gathered his thoughts.

A voice from behind him: “I’m glad you came back to see me.” Steven whirled and saw Clarence standing there, a smirk on his face, his arms folded in a confident knot in front of him. Steven’s mouth was wide open, as if he’d seen—or felt—a presence. Clarence sighed. “Do you believe me now, Mr. Shaw?”

Steven approached him and grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket. “Who the hell are you? Why me?”

“An undignified response coming from a man whose entire life has changed within a matter of days. Please let go of my coat.”

Steven backed off and tried to control his heightened state of conflicted emotions, a mixture of happiness and utter disbelief. “I just don’t understand. I—”

“I know you’re confused by this wave of good luck, but I have nothing to do with it. I can only see it before it happens. These visions I have do not apply to everyone.”

Steven laughed, incredulous. “Do they apply to you?”

“Unfortunately they don’t, not any more. You’re only the second person who has been the recipient of my ability.”

“Who’s the other?” Steven asked.

Clarence smiled. “Me.”

“What?”

“That’s right.”

“How? When?”

“I retired five years ago. I had money in the bank and a good marriage. I worked a part-time job to keep myself busy. The extra money was fun money. I woke up one day and wondered what the point was of working when I didn’t need anything more.”
“So what happened?”
“I took a walk one day and had a vivid daydream about this new life: doing things I only did as a kid, seeing the world, and connecting with old friends. I may be old but my life suddenly became diverse and exciting. Better than ever actually. But then, not long after the change, my wife left me for a priest.”
“You saw that coming?” Steven asked.
“Yes, Mr. Shaw. And I couldn’t stop it. I can’t justify why this has happened to me, nor can I make peace with what my wife did at such an untimely phase in our life. But that’s in the past. Now I see fragments in your life and, instead of ignoring what I see, I’ve decided to reveal them.”
“No more chatting here on the bridge, how about we get a drink or something, Clarence. We can delve deeper into—”
“No, thank you. I must get home to more pressing matters, but you enjoy yourself and have fun at work tomorrow.”
“What do you mean by that?”
Clarence nodded and made his way into the shadows.

* * *

At the restaurant, Steven had been swamped with work. Since the lunch rush the place was extremely busy and, less than five minutes ago, his boss told him to take a break before the dinner crowd started filtering in. He went out back with a soda and a magazine. From around the corner came his boyfriend Martin. “Where have you been, Stevie? You don’t return my calls, haven’t stopped by in days. What’s going on?”

Steven put his hand on Martin’s shoulder. “You’re not going to believe this.”

“Believe what?”

“Let’s go somewhere private.”

Martin couldn’t wait to hear the news. “Okay, fine.”

The two of them went behind a dumpster. Martin looked him up and down. “What, no cigarette for me?”

Steven hesitated, then tapped his empty pockets. “ Haven’t smoked in days. Never gave it a moment’s thought.”

“Did you undergo some intervention?”

“No, Martin, but I feel great.”

After a lengthy conversation, they emerged from behind the garbage compactor. “You gotta meet this guy, Martin. Maybe he’ll see something good for you too.”

“Are you sure this guy isn’t some crazy wino, or murderer or something? I don’t know, Stevie. You mysteriously receive extra cash and win big bucks from some random sweepstakes? Maybe he’s up to something or luring you into a trap of some kind. Money is, after all, the perfect bait.”

“No way can he be, Martin. He’s had more than one chance to attack me and he hasn’t done anything strange. This guy doesn’t come across flashy either. Besides, I can handle myself against some old fart, you know.”

“I know. Just make sure you have eyes in the back of your head. I’ll see you later.”

“Take care, Martin.” They embraced and parted.

* * *

Steven and Martin were sitting up in bed at three o’clock in the morning. Neither of them could sleep: The drastic changes in Steven’s life had his mind spinning. Martin enjoyed being around his lover now; his current mood and personality were unprecedented. “You’ve been transformed, Stevie. I like the new you.”
Slipping into a pair of pants, Steven walked to the kitchen for something to drink. Martin followed him, wearing only his underwear, flaunting his tanned athletic body. “Even the sex is better. Whatever you’re experiencing, Steven, rub it off on me.” Then with a playful smile he said, “Inject me with it.”

Steven poured a glass of juice and offered some to Martin who gave him a funny look. “We’ve been together for three years and it still hasn’t registered that I don’t like juice?”

Steven didn’t respond. He stood quiet, pensive. Martin leaned into him and stroked his face, his silky black hair. “C’mon, let’s go see Clarence. I wanna meet the guy who has waved his magic wand over our life.”

“Maybe tomorrow, Martin. I’d rather get some sleep. Between the excitement and sleep deprivation, I’m dragging my ass lately. It’s hard to get through my shifts at work.”

Martin began rubbing Steven’s shoulders. “You know you can’t say no to me. I don’t ask for much but I’m serious about marching right on up—”

“Okay, okay, Martin. We’ll go. And then I’ll need a breather for a while, all right?”

“You’ll get no argument from me.”

Martin grabbed a pair of Steven’s jeans from the chair. “I’ll dress you myself.”

Steven grinned. “Compromise is the key to any relationship.”

They approached the lighted booth. Cars drove over the bridge, one of which had music blaring from an opened window. Martin turned to Steven. “Don’t you find that annoying?”

Steven wasn’t paying attention, he was studying the bridge.

Martin became frustrated. “Are you listening to me, Steven?”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear you, man. It’s just that this place seems different to me all of a sudden.”

“How?”

“Well, for one, Clarence is nowhere to be found.”

“Does he normally wait for you here?”

Steven rubbed his own left arm with his right hand. “No, it’s just the whole atmosphere feels…” He paused, looked around him. “Off.”

Martin placed his hands in his pockets. “Look, I’m sorry I forced us out here. I was curious.”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” Steven said. “Let’s just walk a little farther and see if Clarence turns up.” Martin nodded and followed him. About thirty feet ahead, Steven pointed at the choppy water below. “Hear that? I like that sound.” They went to the railing and looked over the edge.

Martin shook his head. “Damn, how do suicidals jump from this height?”

“Why don’t you ask Robert Odlum?”

“Who the hell is he?” Martin asked.

“He was the first to jump from this. That was back in 1885. The poor bastard died on impact.”

“Oh, man, Steven. I’m petrified just standing here. Now I have your little story in my head. What are you doing to me, man?”

“You’ll get over it, Martin. I mean, look at the reflections of the lights on the water.” He pointed in the distance. “Check out that little boat. It’s pretty far out there, floating by itself, the occupants probably gazing at the breathtaking skyline.”
Martin smiled. “I’ll agree with you on one thing. It’s definitely peaceful from up here.”

“Do you know what I’m going to do with my winnings, Martin?”

“What?”

“Buy me a boat, bigger than that one, and put it on the water, maybe a big-wheeled truck to pull it.”

“Sorry to slam your idea, but why not just rent one some weekend? It’s a lot cheaper.”

“I want something I can call my own.”

“What do you call your car, your apartment, your life?” There was a pause. “Me?”

“What the hell are you talking about, Martin? I’m talking about a boat here and you’re casting pearls of wisdom?”

“Easy, babe, I was just talking shit, you know th—”

“Good evening, gentleman.”

The men quickly turned. “You’re stealthy, Clarence,” Steven said. “Scared the crap out of me.” He held his hand against his own chest.

“Me too,” Martin said. “Old man’s good, soft on his feet.” He gawked at Clarence. “You’re not what I pictured.”

“Oh no, what did you picture?”

Steven nudged Martin with his elbow, trying to shut him up. “Well, you’re a regular guy. I guess I imagined someone more…polished looking, or, or a wizard type.”

“I’m happy to disappoint.”

“No disappointment on my end. It’s nice to meet you actually. You’ve done wonders for my man here. He speaks highly of you.”

“Is that so? I’ve done nothing for him, though, if I may be honest?”

“Oh, come on,” Martin said. “He won a pile of dough, got slipped extra cash at the dime store, and has been off the stogies. What do you call that?”

“I call that good luck. All I did was reveal what I was seeing.”

“What do you see for me, Clarence, because I gotta tell you, my life needs some sprucing up?”

Steven gave Martin a dirty look. “Do you mind? Let’s not—”

“It’s quite all right, Steven, I can be straight with him.”

“Cool, whaddaya got?”

“Absolutely nothing, young man. I’m drawing a blank.”

“Thanks a lot, Clarence,” he said, disappointed.

“You asked, right?”

“Your point?” Martin said.

“I wasn’t trying to make one. I told Steven before that two people in my life have benefitted from my visions, and he is one of them. I’m not a crazy person, nor a psychic or anything else your imagination can conjure up. I am just like you except for some crystal clear flashes.”

Martin pulled at Steven’s shirt. “Let’s get out of here.”

Steven rubbed his forehead. “Sorry about this, Clarence.” Clarence saluted him as they left the bridge.

* * *

Martin had convinced Steven not to return to the bridge right away; best to take a hiatus from Clarence’s strange but rewarding visions, no matter how tempting they were to hear. Even in his absence, Steven was the recipient of two more unforeseen and life-enriching situations: The owner of the restaurant where he worked asked him to be his business partner. After years of hard
work and good service, the owner, William Carbone, felt that, if anyone was the man for the job, it was Steven. The attractive offer would, at the beginning, quadruple Steven’s annual salary. In addition, Martin, his long-time lover, wanted to share an apartment with him. Steven Shaw’s life had taken an extraordinary turn and all without having Clarence in the picture anymore.

Days following the enticing offer, Steven agreed to move in with Martin. His check had come in the mail and, with his surplus of money, he paid the first year’s rent in advance and added some furnishings. The only thing he hadn’t done was jump at the generous offer to become partners in the restaurant with Carbone. With his newfound fortune he was not eager to commit to anything; he wanted to revel in what he had. In time he would put together a long-term plan.

One evening the two men had a gathering at their apartment; they celebrated Steven’s successes and good fortune by inviting some friends over. He had put his money in the bank and, as his reputable financial advisor had explained, his investment would grow, and in time the sizable accounts would make him even wealthier. He also had accepted the partnership and was drawing a handsome salary. The party was the icing on the cake, a treat.

The crowd spent hours drinking, eating, telling jokes, engaged in various discussions; the party was just like any other. One of the men at the party overheard Steven, who was huddled in the corner of the room with Martin, talking for a good thirty minutes about Clarence. With much prodding, Steven’s friend had convinced the group—ten of them—to head out to the bridge and see what this Clarence character was all about. Despite Steven and Martin’s resistance, the guests convinced them to go.

Within the hour everyone was at the bridge. This time Clarence was there waiting for them, standing by the booth, a slight wind ruffling his ashen hair. The group remained silent, curious looks on their faces, more interested in how he and Steven were going to interact; the group looked as if there were a magician before them about to perform a mind-blowing trick. “Look, I know there’s a lot of us here, Clarence, but—”

“No need to explain yourself, Mr. Shaw. Their appearance is harmless in my eyes.” Clarence stood straight and crossed his arms behind his back, appraising the group. “Nice friends you have, Steven.”

Steven glanced at his pals. “I agree. They’re a curious bunch too—nosy is a better way to put it.”

Martin nodded at Clarence. “Hey, Clarence.”

Clarence smiled, acknowledging him.

Nervously, Steven cracked his knuckles. “Putting their curiosity aside for a moment, I’m glad I came tonight. There’s something I want to tell you.”

“Go ahead, speak.”

Steven ran his fingers through his hair and dried his sweaty hands on his trousers. “I’m not coming back to this bridge anymore. I have to get on with my life…and so do you.”

Clarence smothered a laugh. “By all means, Mr. Shaw. You’re free to do as you wish, although I wish you would stick around.”

“What’s happened in my life is astounding, Clarence,” Steven said. “Thanks for sharing your visions. But really, this is the way it has to be.”

Clarence nodded.

“I’m sure you’re destined for good things too, Clarence, especially after what I’ve been through.”
Clarence pursed his lips. “Well, Steven, there’s even more in store for you.”

“This guy’s amazing, I told you,” Steven said to his friends.

“Thank you, Steven,” Clarence responded.

Martin’s face came alive with anticipation. “What else do you see in his future, huh? What’s on the horizon for Stevie boy?”

Clarence fastened the top buttons of his jacket, the sea breeze now nudging stronger. “Well, I don’t know how this relates to you, but some insomniac will finally be able to sleep. That vision is completely arbitrary, a bit hazy at the moment too.”

“Mrs. Bennett will be delighted to hear that. I can’t wait to tell her. That’s who you’re likely seeing. She’s been that way for over a year. Now she smokes like a chimney. The entire hall stinks for crying out loud. I can say that now because I’ve quit. But she’s good people, you know.”

Clarence massaged his own neck, as if he’d felt a cramp. “There’s more to tell, guys. I think it’s vital I share a vision that’s dubiously etched in my mind. One that has taunted me ever since I awoke this morning in a cold sweat. And since I don’t feel the need to dawdle, nor the desire to prolong revealing this vision, I’ll get to the point. Well… to come right out with it, Steven, whether you’re ready or not… you’re going to die… in a week. I’m terribly sorry, son, but it’s going to be brutal too, in so many ways. This vision has left me restless and weary and quite sickened, which is why I came here tonight, hoping I’d see you. This is the first bad vision I’ve ever had.”

The crowd was frozen. Steven trembled. Martin clutched him. Clarence embraced Steven’s quivering body. All eyes fixed on Steven. “I really am so sorry, Steven. I can’t control what I see. We can only wait and see what happens. Please go in peace and be careful. With a stroke of luck, perhaps your fate will break my streak.” Clarence walked away.

Steven’s friends surrounded him and assisted him off the bridge. He had trouble staying on his own two feet, he hobbled like a drunk. His grim fate overwhelmed him like a raging tide. “That son of a bitch,” Martin mumbled, now acting as a crutch under Steven’s arm. Deep down he knew there was no reason to harbor any anger toward Clarence, but what else could he do? He was trying his best to comfort Steven.

At the apartment, they placed Steven on the couch, got him a few shots of whiskey, and helped him drink them. “I might as well get drunk, I’m going to die anyway,” he howled. As he drank, some of the liquor spilled down his chin and onto the chair. He stood for a moment and wiped the excess from his mouth and then, without warning, broke into a tantrum and began destroying his own apartment, throwing anything he could get his hands on: sofa cushions, lamps, coat stand, CD rack. He flung his belongings across the room and almost hit his friends. The group backed away, unsure of what he might do next in the heat of his breakdown. The situation appeared to be escalating, the potential for danger increasing. Steven was tall and lanky; but under the circumstances he had the strength of a wild bull. Martin tried to restrain him but got shoved forcefully into the wall; the impact put a hole in the sheetrock, a picture frame crashed to the floor and shattered, the vibration caused a candle next to the front door to fall from its holder. Steven screamed again, “Go ahead, call the damn cops, I’m gonna fucking die anyway.”

Using his eyes, Martin signaled to the group and together they tackled Steven and held him down. His outburst turned into hysterical crying, the volume raspy, gut-wrenching; his face flushed red. Martin
started weeping as well, clutching Steven on the floor, doing his best to restrain him, console him. Once the situation was under control, which took a few minutes of intense grappling and exertion, the rest of the guys left, leaving Martin alone with him on the floor. Steven fainted during their embrace.

Hours later, Martin opened his eyes and realized that Steven had left, and most likely had gone back to the bridge or was roaming the streets alone. He quickly searched for Steven and soon found him at the usual spot. Clarence was nowhere in sight. Steven stood on the outer ledge seconds from leaping into the deep, choppy East River. From behind, Martin carefully approached him, trying not to exacerbate the situation. He stopped about ten feet behind him. “Steven, let’s go home.”

Steven turned and glared at him. “It’s too late for heroics, Martin. I just want to be alone. Keep your distance.”

Martin reversed his steps. “Whatever you say. I just want you to come down from there. Please come off that ledge. I love you. We can get through this together. You’re not going to die.”

“Says who?”

“Me.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because you have a whole life ahead of you, Stevie, and Clarence is wrong, I know it.”

Steven tried to suppress his brimming emotions but couldn’t. His arms trembled, his grip on the pipe-like railing began to falter. Droof issued from his mouth in strands. “How can…can…you know…know that?”

“I just do, Steven. So what’re you gonna do? End it this way? So what if Clarence has been right so far. Maybe everything’s a huge coincidence. Did you ever think about that?”

Steven shook his head forlornly, tears streamed down his face. “Clarence!” he shouted. “Clarence, Clarence, Clarence! You tell me, you son of a bitch! What’s gonna happen to me? I can’t take it anymore!”

Steven climbed back over the ledge and ran down the center lane of the bridge, never looking back at Martin. Martin chased him but was having difficulty catching up. “Steven, please stop,” he pleaded. “We can beat this thing.”

A hundred feet ahead, Steven came to a staircase and stopped, his eyes widened in horror: Clarence was splayed on the staircase, blood leaking from his ear, dripping down his neck. Martin approached Clarence’s body and checked for a pulse. “He’s dead, Steven. He’s cold already.”

Steven sat on the ground in front of the railing and placed his head on his knees. Martin sat as well, then put his arm around him. Steven’s face was pale and gaunt. “I’m terrified.”

Martin wiped Steven’s face with his trembling right hand. “So am I. But our life isn’t over yet.”

A versatile writer, David Boyle has written and published two short story collections. His newest book, *Abandoned in the Dark*, has been adapted to film by Cover 3 Productions. Though he earned his readership by creating intense real-life dark fiction, Boyle has garnered a reputation for composing literary stories, essays, articles, aphorisms, reviews, interviews, analyses, a good number of which have appeared in magazines.

Visit him online at www.facebook.com/authordavidboyle.
Adrian Chase walked into his dressing room and stood in front of the air conditioner. It was over ninety degrees on the lot and not even noon. He was sixty-nine years old and out of breath from the walk from the soundstage and the three short stairs up to the door of his trailer. He sat in the chair in front of the makeup mirror and was surprised to see a clear tumbler filled with ice and an amber liquor. He did not remember pouring himself a drink and certainly would have thought twice about starting a cocktail so early in the day. He usually waited till four o’clock before reaching for a drink, unless he was particularly rattled.
He was particularly rattled. The baby-faced assistant director had brought him new pages for the pilot moments after they had finished the first table reading the day before. But he had been pleased by that, not rattled. He had gone from a mute grandfather who sat in front of his television ignoring his family to a crotchety character with a line and, he hoped, a laugh from the audience. That certainly wouldn’t have provoked pouring himself a drink so early in the morning. No, he had even taken it in stride when the AD had flagged him down as soon as he had arrived on the soundstage and handed him another set of new pages. On his way to his trailer he had stopped and chatted with Lissa, the stage manager, before flipping through the new script and seeing his line.

Yes, that could do it. The newer pages. That could have caused him to pour himself a glass of whiskey. But he couldn’t have done that himself because he had just stepped inside the trailer. Some kind soul must have done it for him, knowing what his reaction would be. Now, he deliberated on whether to drink it or toss it out. Years and years of analysis had taught him what he already knew: he was a nasty drunk. This, this glass of whiskey, would be sure to set him on that path the moment the fire hit his belly. No, he needed to remain calm and focused. This was a job. Just as he reached for the glass to toss it down the sink, he noticed a man standing behind him, reflected in the mirror. Startled, Adrian spilt some of the drink on the counter as he tried to put the glass back down.

The man in the mirror was himself. He was smiling and Adrian was not.

“Go ahead, have it,” the man in the mirror said with a wicked, leering grin. “You deserve it. After all you’ve put up with.”

Adrian, anxious and intimidated by his own image, lifted the glass as steadily as he could and then stopped. What the hell was going on here? He turned around and looked out at the room and no one was there. He looked in the mirror again and there he was. The same fellow. Himself, standing over his shoulder, wearing the same outfit he was wearing now, dark slacks and a white shirt. Adrian didn’t think he was hallucinating. He certainly wasn’t overworked, not with this job. He hadn’t worked in close to a month. And he wasn’t sick—or at least he certainly didn’t think he was ill, only momentarily winded from the heat and old age. Last week he had been to see a doctor because of the episode of vertigo he had experienced after taking an antihistamine. The doctor had said there was nothing wrong with him; his hearing and vision had all tested fine and the doctor suggested he might be stressed and overworked. Stressed and overworked? Of course he wasn’t stressed and overworked. He had flown to the West Coast so he could be stressed and overworked, stressed over a fabulous part and worked to death, but nothing had come his way. Bored and depressed was more like it. First, the movie he had been cast in was canceled when the star dropped out to take another project, and then the advertising agency decided the national commercial Adrian had been cast for was the wrong approach for the client. Now, he was testing for a role in a sitcom. A pilot. Not even a sure thing. Adrian was certain this lousy script would never make it to prime time. It was a waste of his time. If anything was going on then it was most certainly not because he was overworked. No, he was a professional who had showed up to do his job, no matter how lousy the finished product was to be in the end.

Adrian studied the man standing over his shoulder. He looked exactly as Adrian looked now—graying hair turning white, bags beneath the eyes, fleshy jowls framing his cheeks, and pale, colorless eyes. “If you’ve come to scare me,” Adrian said.
“You could at least be younger. I was a rather dashing fellow once upon a time.”

He had been a handsome boy on the stage. Perfect posture, perfect teeth, thick curly hair. A signature baritone voice that belied breeding and class. And his career as a lover was as notable as his acting résumé. The man standing behind him was the lecherous kind of fool Adrian had spent years avoiding in dressing rooms, an old troll who lusted after nothing else but youth.

In the mirror, Adrian watched the figure pick up the glass and offer it to him first.

“Go ahead,” Adrian said to his image. “Drink yourself miserable. I don’t need a crutch. I can do this crappy role in my sleep.”

Adrian cast his eyes away from the mirror and down to the script. He found his line, read it, and tried to imagine himself saying the words. Then, he said the words out loud to the man in the mirror: “Gotta run and blow some gas!”

“Pretty lousy, if you ask me,” the man in the mirror said. “Fifty years’ worth of top-notch acting experience and you’re reduced to doing lines about flatulence.”

Adrian tried to ignore the comment, which was like ignoring his conscience, only more tangible, like someone was standing over his shoulder and admonishing him, which was exactly what was happening. Or was it? Maybe he was just talking to himself. He looked up from his script and there he still was, standing over himself with his arms crossed and resting on his paunch. The glass of whiskey was still on the counter.

“Not your proudest moment, eh?” the man in the mirror said.

“I’ve no regrets,” Adrian answered himself. “I’ve had a terrific career.”

“Career?” His image smiled back at him. “What about the rest of your life?”

“What ‘rest’ are you referring to?” Adrian answered. “My career is my life.”

“Precisely,” his image replied. “It’s all made up. Nothing real to it, is there?”

“I’ll junk up the sweatshirt a little,” Candy said. “Put a soda stain on it at the chest. Maybe ketchup at the hem.”

Candy was the assistant wardrobe consultant. Adrian had never met the wardrobe consultant or costume designer for the pilot, if there was a costume designer. He was standing in front of a mirror in a curtained-off area of the wardrobe department wearing the oversized sweatshirt and pants that his grandfatherly character would wear. Candy’s interpretation was that the grandfather would be a slob.

“Perhaps Grandpa is a neatnik,” Adrian said.

“Neatnik?”

“Conscientious.”

“The guy stinks up the house!” Candy said and laughed.

Adrian wasn’t sure if the laugh was directed at him or his character. “Un-knowing-ly,” Adrian enunciated slowly.

“That’s why it’s so funny,” Candy said. “In his mind he’s a neatnik but in reality he’s an old man who spills things. Maybe I’ll add a mustard stain too.”

“Mustard?”

“I hope it won’t make you hungry!” Candy said and laughed again.

It was a harmless sort of laugh which Adrian did not appreciate because he found it irritating. He found everything about the woman irritating. Her silly oversized jewelry. Her smelly perfume. Her name. Candy. Candy should be a hooker’s name, not that of an assistant wardrobe consultant.
“In his introduction, James Currier writes of forming the desire a number of years ago to move beyond his reputation as an AIDS writer. In reinventing himself, he remained concerned as ever with issues relevant to the lives of contemporary gay men. Setting down a list of topics to address, he included—substance abuse, gay marriage, serving in the military, domestic abuse in gay relationships, hate crimes, homophobia, and living outside of urban areas—all represented here. At the same time, Currier began a study of classic ghost stories, a genre that had fascinated him since boyhood. (Favorites mentioned are the works of M. R. James, Henry James, E. F. Benson, Edith Wharton, and Ambrose Bierce.) The best of the resulting collection draws upon the past in observing the present, and in doing so never fails to disturb and entertain.”
—Joyce Meggett, ALA GLBTRT Newsletter

Praise for The Haunted Heart and Other Tales

“I am completely amazed by the range of ghost stories in this collection. These are awesome ghost stories, and the literary connections to gay life are deep and complex.”
—Chad Helder, Unspeakable Horror and The Pop-Up Book of Death

“Currier’s characters are sumptuous, his plots are freshly twisted and his prose magnificent. A perfectly chilling collection of tales from one of the modern masters of the genre. Powerful stuff, indeed.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

“Currier’s writing is flawless and his knack for conveying emotion, with both the spoken words and thoughts of his characters, is unparalleled. Fans of the author have come to expect that his work isn’t exactly light or escapist, which makes it all the more affecting.”
—Chris Verleger, Edge

“I found each of these stories just as satisfying and unique as a full length novel, so much so that, as I often do with longer stories, I thought about each story for days after I finished reading it. Give it five twisted stars out of five.”
—Bob Lind, Echo Magazine

“Jameson Currier’s The Haunted Heart and Other Tales expands upon the usual ghost story tropes by imbuing them with deep metaphorical resonance to the queer experience. Infused with flawed, three-dimensional characters, this first-rate collection strikes all the right chords in just the right places. Equal parts unnerving and heartrending, these chilling tales are testament to Currier’s literary prowess and the profound humanity at the core of his writing. Gay, straight, twisted like a pretzel...his writing is simply not to be missed by any reader with a taste for good fiction.”
—Vince Liaguno, Dark Scribe Magazine

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
“Take them off and leave them on the hook and I’ll dirty them up before the taping,” she said and left the curtained area.

Adrian was alone in front of the mirror. His throat was dry and a wave of nausea made him dizzy. Mustard! He was about to take off the sweatshirt when he saw an image of a young man reflected in the mirror and standing behind him. He was dressed in a dark suit with a thin tie. His curly hair was longish and wild, like the rock stars of the early sixties. The Beatle bob.

“I’ll be right out,” Adrian said to the fellow.

“Don’t hurry on my account,” the young man said.

The young man didn’t leave. He folded his arms across his chest. One hand held a drink: a tumbler of ice with an amber liquor. He rattled the glass so the ice gave out a light tinkly sound. Adrian knew immediately who it was. He didn’t have to turn around and find that he was still there. Or not. It was a vision of himself at twenty-five. “Nice and neat,” Adrian nodded to his younger self in the mirror.

“Sharp,” his younger image replied and held the tumbler out as a toast. “Don’t you think?”

He’d landed on the London stage as a brash young man from Dorset. He was fearless, no role was unapproachable, nor out of his grasp. He played the game and played it well. He allowed himself to be fondled and always provided an extra “service” when an audition required one. His future was promising. He had played Hamlet by the time he was twenty-one. Twenty-one. And garnered laudable reviews for it. His career skyrocketed. He was willing to tackle any role. Including Eddie Lord, the nasty young lover in a new play bound for the West End. A nasty young lover—to another man. A role he could do in his sleep because it mirrored his own life so closely. His life with Jon. Jon, the stocky working class stiff from Glasgow who wanted to be an actor, too, with a barrel chest full of dark hair and a bag of accents he could change on cue. They had met at the Academy. Jon was rugged and handsome, like he had spent seasons roaming the moors. He was serious and committed to everything. He unleashed something in Adrian that otherwise might have taken years for him to accept as more than something he only did to get ahead. They moved in together while still studying and doing workshops. It was a good arrangement. Two bachelors sharing a flat. No one suspected. Even when fame arrived it was never a topic of conversation in the press. Until he became Eddie Lord.

Adrian’s performance as Eddie Lord was so credible it started critics’ tongues wagging about his private life. Did he or didn’t he like guys? Jon thought they both should be out and open about their relationship, public about everything, including their other lovers, tricks, and affairs. Adrian balked and resisted. His opposition created arguments and nasty scenes. He moved out of the flat and got a bigger place in Soho by himself. Jon protested. It made what was invisible now highly suspect when one of them stayed over too late with the other. It didn’t help that Adrian had also filmed a small part in an American film that made a big impact. Another nasty young man. A nasty young homosexual. It was one of his smallest roles, but his most bitter performance on record. And then Jon was arrested in a public toilet. He had no choice but to stop seeing Jon and start being seen with Izzie. And it helped that he liked Izzie. Elizabeth Rippen, the American heiress and would-be actress. Izzie was outrageous. She liked drinking and partying and creating a scene in public. With Jon out of the picture and Izzie as a decoy Adrian could be as hedonistic as he wanted because everyone wrote about her. Or him and her. He asked Izzie to marry him. To
"A delightfully spooky, often kooky, gay vision quest. Currier’s Avery Dalyrymple is larger-than-life and intricately flawed, and the fact that he just can’t seem to get out of his own way makes him primed for misadventure and gay mayhem. One of Currier’s strengths has always been the ability to soak his narrative in a rich, authentic ambiance and The Wolf at the Door is no exception, with sentences that resonate with the decadent rhythms of the French Quarter and paragraphs that positively drip with Southern gothic moodiness. Genre fans will find plenty to appreciate in Currier’s otherworldly version of It’s a Wonderful Life fused with all the ensemble wit of Tales of the City and the regional gothic texture of Anne Rice’s Interview with the Vampire. Savor this one like a bowlful of spicy jambalaya and a snifter of fine aged bourbon on a hot, humid night."

—Vince Liaguno, Dark Scribe Magazine

Praise for The Wolf at the Door

"It’s not easy to classify Currier’s novel. The New Orleans setting leads naturally to spirited spookiness, with supernatural proceedings and ghostly manifestations, including that of a gorgeous young man, the late partner of Mack, who is dying of HIV in an upstairs apartment—adding a touch of realistic melancholy to the tale. And the story is also infused with erotic passages. So let’s just classify the novel as really good—a masterful blend of genres that comes together like succulent literary gumbo. Currier’s crew of querulous aging queens, offbeat beautiful boys and assorted oddball friends constitute an endearing found family of queers, while the author’s historical flashbacks conjure the Big Easy’s atmospheric past."

—Richard Labonté, Bookmarks

"Currier is a master storyteller of speculative fiction, and this novel is unique in that it takes a group of unbelievers (whom I can identify with) and gradually forces them to accept the reality of what they are experiencing. Very creative story, told with a dry wit by a group of highly diverse, realistic, flawed individuals who become links to the past and instrumental in helping some tortured souls find their rest. Outstanding for those who appreciate this genre of fiction. Five ghostly stars out of five."

—Bob Lind, Echo Magazine

"Refreshingly light and witty.... The chatty first person narrative is augmented by historically accurate journals, diaries, and slave narratives. The bright, hopeful tone of the prose and Currier’s love for his imperfect characters makes this a charming read."

—Craig Gidney, Lambda Literary

"Stirring a gumbo pot of characters and subplots, Currier keeps his unlikely mix of ingredients at a perfect simmer as they meld into a singularly delectable story with a sense of place so rich, readers may be enticed to head to Louisiana and experience the novel’s setting firsthand."

—Jim Gladstone, Passport

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squelch what rumors remained about his homosexuality. Even though his colleagues, his peers in the theater and in film, those other gay actors in London and New York and Hollywood, knew all about him and the guys he slept with—many of these same fellows, in fact, he had slept with himself.

They were engaged until she met another man she liked better. A man who would sleep with her. And their spats became more public, more visible. The media adored the sparring couple so much that they had to remain apart.

“You couldn’t escape it, could you?” the man in the mirror said. “It was always a part of your résumé.”

“I wasn’t Eddie Lord.”

“But you were. You broke Jon’s heart.”

“We were young. What did we know?”

“He knew he loved you.”

“I found him a decent barrister,” Adrian said. “I kept it out of court.”

“For which he was grateful,” his image replied. “And after which he expected you would return.”

“We couldn’t go back to the way things were,” Adrian said. “He knew that.”

“He was willing to risk what you wouldn’t,” the man in the mirror said.

“I got him that part, didn’t I?” Adrian said. “The part he begged me to help him get.”

“But he died before he could do it. Suicide.”

“It was an accident.”

“An accidental overdose.”

“Why bring this up after all these years?”

“Why haven’t you forgotten it, if you don’t feel some form of guilt?”

“Guilt?” Adrian replied. “It was different then. It was a different time.”

“Always a bit ashamed, aren’t we?”

“He knew how I felt about him.”

“Which was why you know it was no accident.”

* * *

He wasn’t ready to return to his dressing room and face another image of himself. Instead, he spotted Glenn, the production stylist, at the crew table, mulling over the spread of bagels and doughnuts. Glenn was an openly gay guy, a fellow with a shaved scalp, tattoos, piercings, and big arms.

“Go ahead,” Adrian said to him. “I doubt if a few carbs would do you any harm.”

“Why can’t they do something healthier?” Glenn moaned. “How about crudités and low-fat dip for a change?”

“I doubt that would attract anyone to the table,” Adrian answered and reached for a pastry. He followed Glenn to a row of chairs against the soundstage wall and balanced a paper cup of hot coffee and the pastry on his lap. They made chitchat about the weather (“It should break on the weekend.”) and the lot. (“Everyone’s buzzing about the reality show being taped next door.”) Adrian eyed the beefy fellow—he must be in his early thirties—from his peripheral vision—the way Glenn’s bicep flexed as he ate the bagel he had smeared with cream cheese, the size of his lips and the width of his jaw, the stubble of hair on his scalp. Youth, he thought, wasted on the youth. He wanted to strip the fellow, ask him to prance around nude so he could admire his physique, then suggest they get down to the real business at hand. Sex. Ah, if only his heart could stand such delicious torture.

Instead, Adrian asked if the pilot taping was still on schedule for the afternoon.

“No, no,” Adrian said. “I’m here for a while.”

“Where you crashing?” Glenn asked.

“A friend’s place in the Hills.”

“Cool.”

There was a lull in the conversation, as they both finished their food. Glenn shifted in his chair as if to leave, then stopped and said to Adrian, “Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“No, of course not. My personal life is rather public these days.”

“My lover would kill me if I let the chance pass.”

“Hmmm… Well then, go ahead.”

“Was it true about Sir Harry?”

“Harry?”

“The myth?”

“Ah, the endowment?”

Glenn nodded and widened his eyes. Sometimes Adrian resented these questions, the perverse curiosity of the voyeur of fame, but he liked this young fellow and didn’t mind sharing and perpetuating The Myth of Harrold Harcourt.

“Whatever you’ve heard,” Adrian said. “It was all true.”

Yes, it was true. Sir Harrold Harcourt was a perpetual cad. A rogue. A louse. He could drink Adrian under the table and out whore him on every level. But he was the great love of Adrian’s life. They were together for sixteen years—not all of them brilliant and not all of them lousy, but every one of them full of drama. Best friends, to the public. Partners to the industry crowd. Lovers in the eyes of the community. The dinner parties that they gave in Kensington and Bel Air were notorious. Guests always brought guests. The police always seemed to hear of them.

“How could you ever let him out of your sight?”

“Dear boy, I had it so many times it wasn’t new anymore. And the novelty wore off early on. Harry’s cock was such an inelegant thing. You couldn’t quite get your lips around it, and it took forever for it to get hard.”

The salacious detail delighted the young man. “Be still my heart,” he said and smiled, then feigned swooning by lifting his fist to his forehead in a showy fashion.

The gesture provoked a loud laugh from Adrian. “But when it was hard,” he added. “Harry certainly knew what to do with it.”

* * *

Adrian watched the rehearsal until it was time for his scene. On the set, he sat in the old armchair, pretending to watch a television. He delivered his line effortlessly. When the director called it a wrap, Lissa mentioned that sound effects would be added for the taping.

“Sound effects?” Adrian asked.

“The gas,” Lissa said and laughed. Adrian disliked her laugh as much as he did Candy’s, though this one had a little too much intelligence behind it, as if Lissa were laughing down at him.

Adrian walked back to his trailer dejected, his stomach grumbly from the pastry and the acidity of the coffee. His agent had been able to negotiate two things properly for this fiasco—a private dressing room and featured billing. Adrian stepped inside the trailer and saw the glass of whiskey on his counter. He had forgotten all about the man in the mirror.

“Go ahead,” a voice said. “Have it.”
The man in the mirror was younger than the one he had seen in his trailer before, but considerably older than the youth he had been with in the costume room. He was The Widower. The Man Who Was Left Behind.

“It was Harry’s choice not to tell anyone he was sick,” Adrian said. “I was only honoring what he wanted.”

“So you concocted an elaborate rouse,” the man said. “A liver disease. How convenient. In front of the world with your lover dying of AIDS, you went before the cameras and said it was a liver problem and you were stepping in to save the day. No one trusted you after that. Not even your own community.”

Harry’s star turn as a gadabout in a BBC miniseries had brought him a lot of notoriety. And the rumors started. Especially when he decided not to act anymore. He didn’t like the way he was aging, wasting away daily before his eyes because of a virus in his blood. His retirement was a way to gracefully step aside and get better. Only he didn’t. Didn’t get better.

“We were great friends,” Adrian said. He felt a weakness in his chest and voice.

“That’s what you told the press,” the man in the mirror said. “He was furious with you. Taking his part before he was cold in the grave.”

Adrian lucked out when Harry turned down a role and it was offered to him instead. Adrian took the part and it was end of things between them. When Adrian left to film the movie, Harrold died.

“He turned it down.”

“And you stepped over him to take it. With him on his deathbed.”

“But I made up for it, didn’t I? After he died,” Adrian said to the man in the mirror. “I did all that campaigning against Clause 28. It was a big change for me.”

“Oh, yes,” the man in the mirror said. “It was suddenly very fashionable to be gay and angry. It served you well.” The man nodded at the glass. “Take a sip. You deserve it.”

“Think I will,” Adrian said. “Think I will.”

He laughed or thought he laughed. He looked up at the mirror but the man was gone. Adrian turned around, but there was no one else in the room. No one in the mirror. And no drink waiting for him.

He felt suddenly tired. The heartburn from the pastry and the coffee was overwhelming. He went to the chair by the air conditioner and stretched out his feet and fell asleep.

He was woken a few hours later by a knock at the door. It was Candy dropping off his clothes for the taping. On the sweatshirt were a yellow stain and a red stain. She laughed when she handed them to him. That obnoxious, irritating giggle.

Adrian dressed in the sweatshirt and pants. In front of the mirror, he waited for his image to appear. He was glad when he realized he was finally alone.

A few minutes later, however, Glenn arrived with a makeup kit and Adrian sat in front of the mirror while the younger man added more years to his face.

“Gay men always have younger complexions,” Glenn said. “Don’t you think?”

The comment rattled Adrian, but he held his displeasure in the tightness of his cheeks. He didn’t like being marginalized into a category. The gay category. Even after all these years, after all that had happened. He never denied that he was a homosexual when asked. That was the concession he had made in his life. But he was an actor first. Not a gay actor.

Adrian distracted himself from the rising bad mood by focusing again on the movement of Glenn’s bicep as he brushed
powder across his face. *What would I do if I could have another chance?* he thought. *Another man. Another lover. I would dote on him and make him happy.*

“My lover and I are having some friends over on Saturday,” Glenn said. “We’d love it if you would come.”

“Hmmmm... Saturday?” Adrian lifted his eyes and found Glenn’s.

“We know you’re busy, but it would be a lot of fun.”

“Sounds lovely,” Adrian answered. “I would love it.”

Glenn wrote down his address on the front page of Adrian’s script. Adrian nodded and smiled. *An invitation. An invitation to something fun.*

When Glenn left, Adrian stood and stretched through some yoga poses, trying to relieve the lingering indigestion that haunted him. He felt optimistic and desirable because of Glenn’s invitation, though still pessimistic about the upcoming taping and his ridiculous line. He felt the warring moods in his mind, which was when the man in the mirror returned.

“Nothing will come of it,” the man in the mirror said to Adrian. He was again the old fellow he had seen that morning. The old fellow who had arrived on set to tape a lousy television pilot. And the glass of whiskey was back on the counter.

“Why can’t you be happy for once in your life?” Adrian asked his image.

“Oh, I’ve had pleasure,” the man said. “Plenty of that.”

“No, happy.”

“Happy?”

“Happy.”

“To happiness, then...” the man said. He lifted the glass of whiskey off the counter and took a sip. Adrian felt the fire burn in his stomach. The man in the mirror smiled and took another sip, rattled the ice in the glass and drank some more. As he swallowed, an ice cube stuck in the man’s throat. Adrian saw the man’s expression change in the mirror. That horror of disbelief that something like this could happen. In his own chest, Adrian felt a burning fire and clutched at it dramatically.

He fell to the floor and felt a tremor of terror. He let go of a large bubble of gas that had been trapped inside him all day. It rumbled and burst through him with an awful sound and a dreadful stench. This had all been a mistake, he thought, clutching his chest and gasping for air. *An awful mistake.* This was not how he had imagined his life would end. This was no way to end a brilliant career.

Jameson Currier is the author of eleven works of fiction, including the recently released novel, *Based on a True Story,* and a collection of intimate writings, *Until My Heart Stops.* He is the editor and publisher of *Chelsea Station.* “The Man in the Mirror” first appeared in *Icarus,* a magazine of gay speculative fiction.
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An Older Man
by Wayne Hoffman
Bear Bones Books
978-1590212912
148 pages, paperback, $16.00

Review by Michael Graves

In Wayne Hoffman’s novella, An Older Man, audiences are treated to a sequel of Hard, the author’s 2008 literary debut. Our hero, Moe Pearlman, is sweating through July and in Provincetown that signals a call to the wild. Bear Week! Moe is on a mission and he has just six days to succeed.

An Older Man is a charming, genuine love letter to P Town. As many know, this small shred of land at the tip of Massachusetts thrives as a key vacation spot for gay and lesbian folks. The summer weeks are fashioned with themes and the streets are constantly clogged with fun. Slices of Spiritus Pizza are scoffed while endless showgirl street barkers wail. Solid Gold tea dance rages on while cups of Planter’s Punch are swilled. With great skill, Hoffman’s prose beautifully captures the spirit of this truly unique destination.

Moe Pearlman is a character that personifies sexual freedom. He is proud of his prowess and his colored history of conquests. His favorite spot in P Town is a fabled dock where men meet for anonymous encounters. It is here that Moe is pursued by a much younger suitor. This triggers a crisis. Moe discovers that, after years of beardom, he now qualifies as an older man.

Hoffman’s Moe is brutally real, brutally honest, and readers identify with him instantly. We know this guy. Or we might be this guy. He suffers from insecurities that include body image. He is annoyed by his forgetful, ailing father. Most paramount, Moe longs to combat his evergrowing loneliness.

With only hours of vacation left, one character tells Moe, “Just remember that being an older man is a privilege that not everyone gets.” In an acute manner, Wayne Hoffman reminds us that being an older man doesn’t merely involve being a bear or a twink. Being an older man is about becoming more confident, becoming wiser, and becoming more kind to yourself.

Michael Graves is the author of Dirty One. This debut collection of stories was a Lambda Literary Award finalist and an American Library Association honoree. His work has appeared in numerous literary journals, including Post Road, Blithe House Quarterly, Chelsea Station, and With: New Gay Fiction. His novel Parade was recently published by Chelsea Station Editions.
Review by Jason Anthony

One of Michael Graves’ many gifts as a writer is creating characters that the reader instantly falls in love with, as exemplified in his latest book, Parade and its protagonists, cousins Reggie Lauderdale and Elmer Mott. When life strikes each young man with lessons through loss and pain, Reggie and Elmer escape their lives in a stolen limousine. As they push through the shaken perspectives of life and religion that they’ve always known Graves creates a heart-warming adventure for the reader to root for and join.

He delivers an entertaining story full of timeless lessons and ingredients for living. They are valuable reminders; no matter how old someone is, displayed through the boys’ unshakable, supportive bond, their desire to be good, and to grow.

With a colorful array of supporting characters, that add their own special spice to the story, Graves carries the reader on a remarkable and endearing coming-of-age tale. Parade refreshes the reader with the positive in life and those that see us through it.

It is a touching novel that deserves to have a significant place in LGBT literature. There is no way after reading Parade that someone, including myself, would not want to be a follower of the church of Michael Graves and what comes next.

Jason Anthony is the author of the memoirs Amsterdam Angel and The Reverie Bubble. He is currently working on his next book, which continues the adventure his previous books began. He’s also exploring screenwriting and is adapting Amsterdam Angel into a screenplay. Jason currently resides in New York City.
Finding Pluck
by Peter Difatta
Pembroke Publications
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Review by Keith Glaeske

It is the spring of 1995, and Taylor Hanes has been accepted to attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for the upcoming fall. Unfortunately, the mounting medical bills from his mother’s descent into Alzheimer’s mean that the only way he’ll be able to attend is if he acquires some significant financial aid—which he finds in a full-ride Gay and Lesbian Equality Scholarship for GLBT students attending Chapel Hill. Not surprisingly, when news breaks in his hometown of Tartan, NC that Taylor has won this scholarship, small town intolerance rears its head: he loses most of his friends, and his girlfriend breaks up with him. As he attends his first year at university, Taylor discovers that most of his education takes place outside of the classroom.

With a set-up like this, Peter Difatta’s debut novel Finding Pluck sounds like a typical coming-of-age/coming out novel; what sets it apart is that Taylor is not gay. So Taylor does not learn how to be gay (i.e., how to navigate the rules and customs of the gay subculture), but what it is like to be gay. Taylor’s first year at college requires a lot of (re-)education on his part, as he experiences homophobia and prejudice first hand, and he learns about the systematic discrimination against GLBT people (something he has not had to consider before, given his straight white male privilege). To Difatta’s credit, he does not ever play Taylor’s ignorance fort cheap laughs; and—just this one spoiler—eventually Taylor admits his deception, in a reverse sort of coming out.

Additionally, this novel incorporates the speculative fiction element of the ghost of Bernard “Fitz” Pembroke haunting Taylor. Pembroke, a Chapel Hill alumnus, established the trust that supports Taylor’s scholarship. Racked with guilt for his deception, Taylor initially assumes that he is to blame for the ghost’s unrest; but as he and his new friends at Chapel Hill research the life of Pembroke in an effort to lay his spirit to rest, they eventually uncover the true reason for Pembroke’s appearances.

Some readers may find the novel’s premise offensive; but if they set that aside, they will realize that the heart of this novel is the mystery surrounding Bernard Pembroke and Damien Holdrich’s disappearance. The novel is two parallel stories: Taylor’s freshman year at Chapel Hill is
contrasted to Pembroke’s sophomore year at the same institution almost seventy years earlier, in 1927, at the height of the Jazz Age, also a time of great prosperity, and of quickly changing social mores. It is Pembroke’s story of attending Chapel Hill, meeting Damien “Pluck” Holdrich, discovering their mutual attraction while playing crew, and the consequences of their relationship that provide the expected coming-out aspect of this novel. Naturally, the consequences prove to be quite dramatic, given the time period; still, setting the novel during two different time periods demonstrates how much and how little has changed regarding GLBT rights. (And setting part of the novel during the Roaring Twenties also corrects the assumption that GLBT history only began with the Stonewall riots in 1969, when in truth America has gone through cycles of conservatism and liberalism throughout its history.)

Keith Glaeske is a medievalist and collector of speculative fiction currently living in Washington, DC. His articles about medieval literature have been published in Medieval Perspectives, Traditio, and Ériu. He regularly reviews books for Chelsea Station, Lambda Literary Review, and other sites.
Fredric Sinclair is a Brooklyn-based author. Several of his plays have been produced in New York City, most recently at the Midtown International Theater Festival and Manhattan Repertory Theatre. His short works have appeared in *Jersey Devil Press, Long River Review*, and *Verbicide*, and he was awarded a spot at the 2015 Sewanee Writers’ Conference. Fredric is currently at work on stories, a novel, and an art book collaboration. He can be found on the Web at [www.fredricsinclair.com](http://www.fredricsinclair.com).
Education

When he first arrived at school
The pages of books still seemed so smooth—
His course books, his poetry books,
The books in the library in the late autumn sun—
Books he collected long ago when he was sick
And took to bed with him and fell asleep
With them resting on his chest, a finger
Still crooked on the spine, the even
Rising and falling of his breath rocking them to his side.

But soon he knows (How? He does not know)
Waking late on late November days
To a cold linoleum floor and a stack of half-read
Paperbacks by the bed—how he holds them at night like
Dolls, like a child does.
For the same simple reasons as a child.

And soon he knows (How? He does not know)
That the pages of books are really not so smooth,
And dolls are for sissies.

—Fredric Sinclair
Several months ago, desperate to surround myself with black gay writers, who could better relate to my work, I placed an ad online to establish a black gay writers group. My goal was to start a monthly writers circle in which black gay men engaged in any type of writing project could receive helpful criticism from members of their community, the ones who would best comprehend the aesthetics and themes embodied in their work. The idea of creating a community of well-read black gay men who were articulate, witty, creative, disciplined, and skilled in the craft of writing had been on my mind since I earned a masters of fine arts in writing five years earlier. At that time I was the only African American student in the program and one of its few openly gay students. My peers, who were for the most part white middle class young adults, seemed to have very little cultural engagement with the black community beyond listening to
popular hip-hop songs and watching a few Will Smith movies. Although some of them took an active interest in my writing, others professed their ignorance of black history and culture and expressed no interest in my work. On one occasion a pedigreed, well-educated classmate who fancied himself the star of the writing program wrote me a three-page letter conveying his disinclination to read the first draft of my novel, which I had submitted to our workshop, only to relay to me that upon hearing our classmates’ encouraging reviews he decided to peruse it after all. Following this admission he provided an exhaustive list of the many ways he believed my novel failed before dismissing it as a weak attempt to fuse *Native Son* and *Will & Grace*. Expressions of condescension like this were actually quite common in my workshops, and because of them my experience in the program left me jaded and more self-conscious about my writing than I was before I entered graduate school.

After I earned my MFA and tried to secure agent representation for my novel, the litany of rejections I received sent me into a downward spiral. Agents deemed the novel either too black or too gay. While the shelves of my local bookstores continued to stock one clichéd, poorly written mass market novel after another, my brainchild gathered dust on my desk, all two hundred and twenty-three pages yellowing. Many of the African American novels being published at the time were those deemed street lit: fiction focused on baby mama drama, church girls in love with thugs, and the general hoopla of ghetto life. The only gay novels being published involved eighteen-year-old blond white boys from Nebraska who become models in New York City and end up living fabulous lives with older rich boyfriends while participating in one orgy after another. Finding my style of writing and my personal experiences reflected in both black and gay novels proved futile. Yet I believed whole-heartedly that somewhere in Chicago existed other black gay writers like me who were committed to writing and wanted to make their mark in American letters. When I posted the call for my group on Meetup.com, I described it as a place where black gay men who were serious about writing could gather once a month to workshop each other’s work, trade information on getting published or finding jobs, and perhaps even hold open mic readings. Six men joined; only one showed up.

Landon and I met on a chilly, wet Sunday afternoon in February at a coffee shop in Boystown. Impish, effete, and soft spoken, he shook my hand, sat down at the table with me and soon we began exchanging stories about how we came to be writers, hardships we’ve encountered teaching disinterested undergraduates the finer points of composition, and our challenges getting published. Landon self-published a slim collection of poems a few years ago and presented me with an autographed copy. In exchange I gave him a chapter from a novella I had written a few years ago that I’ve been thinking about expanding into a novel. We got along very well in that first meeting and agreed to meet again the following month to discuss one another’s work and exchange new material. Over the next three months we met at the same coffee shop on the last Sunday of each month and offered insights into each other’s writing, hoping other members would gradually show up and take part. We conversed through text messages and emails and eventually became comfortable enough with each other for Landon to discuss a burgeoning fling that had begun between him and an older man he recently met at a bus stop. I write fiction, essays, and poetry, but Landon only writes poems. I read his book of poems, and although I didn’t think they were the most accomplished or technically proficient poems I’d ever read, they were bold confessional works, stark in presentation, and frank in subject matter. The collection chronicled his ongoing battle with HIV, the physical and psychological toll the virus and its treatment took on his body, and the ups and downs he experienced dating black gay men as a black gay man with HIV. Short, blunt, and esoteric, Landon’s poems privileged subject over
style, technique and acuity of language, recalling the hastily written, overemotional knock-offs of better poems that I and virtually every poet wrote at the beginning of his or her career. Landon had a trove of personal experiences, feelings, and opinions he wanted to express, but he still had a long way to go as a poet. I myself had taken a personal vow at the end of my MFA program never to workshop my poems again. For me, fiction and essays are labors of creative expression, and I can withstand criticism of that work in a way I cannot tolerate the butchering of my poems, which I view as labors of love. Good or bad, any critique of my poetry leaves me feeling awkward or, in extreme cases, utterly destroyed.

In April, National Poetry Month, I decided to follow Landon’s lead and attempt to write a poem each day for the entire month. Although I was swamped at work, writing a poem each night became a task I looked forward to, a way to relieve the day’s stress. Before long, several interesting motifs began to emerge in these poems: trains, boxcars, departing for the open road, the conflation of writing and history, eroticism—all figured into these poems, some of the best I felt I had ever written. Landon and I agreed to exchange our poems and discuss them at our next meeting. His new poems departed from confessionals to meditations on African American pop culture. Specifically, his poems made pointed criticisms of *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, and *The Cosby Show*. Though his poems conveyed praise and a sense of solidarity with the working class characters of *Good Times* and *Sanford and Son*, he lambasted *The Cosby Show* for what he perceived as the Huxtables’ upper-middle class snobbery and abandonment of the race. The poems both angered and perplexed me, yet I had to put whatever personal feelings I had aside and critique the work on its own merits, or lack thereof. When we met at the coffee shop, I chose my words carefully when I offered my critique of Landon’s verse. As always, I began with the aspects of the collection I admired and felt warranted praise before I shared my critique and misgivings of the poems’ themes and style, which in some cases was quite superficial and solipsistic (he had a habit of purposely leaving his poems untitled then dedicating them to various people). My biggest criticism of Landon’s poems regarded his hostile attitude toward *The Cosby Show* and its characters. In so many words, he reviled the Huxtables as white folks in black face, sell-outs and race traitors of the worst variety. These were not poems; they were screeds against the black middle class, and I communicated this to Landon as tactfully as I could.

He accepted my opinions calmly and politely, gathered the pages I had scribbled with green ink, and then began to discuss the thirty or so poems I had written. When I glanced down at the pages he had annotated I noticed lots of question marks, but I dismissed them. Landon and I had both endured the rigors of writing workshops, and in spite of my apprehension toward seeking criticism of my poems, I felt with Landon that I was in safe company. I didn’t expect him to praise these rough drafts to the heavens, I had no grand illusions about them, yet I could not have prepared myself for the vituperative comments he was about to make. Initially, he asked me lots of questions about some of the references I made in the poems, those pertaining to Greek mythology (“Who are Zeus and Ganymede?”), food and wine (“What is a gimlet?”) and classic cinema (“Who was Greta Garbo?”) Next, he questioned some of my word choices, confessing that he had to consult his dictionary several times during the process of reading the poems. In general he felt the poems were too “clean;” for example, in the few erotic poems included among my offerings, he suggested a flurry of synonyms I should use for *semen*, and balked at many of the linguistic flourishes I utilized in the poems. These last criticisms were quite valid and I took them into consideration during the process of revision. Yet after our meeting I flipped through my poems and became enraged as I read his comments, which gradually devolved from constructive criticisms to calumnious personal attacks: *Why aren’t you writing about the black*
experience? Are you still a brutha? You just don’t want to be black. The black aesthetic is beautiful—find it! Landon attacked virtually every poem I had written that wasn’t overtly sexual or didn’t directly address race. The sharp criticisms I received in my writing program were tiny thorns compared to Landon’s poisoned arrows.

My experience with Landon left me reeling for weeks. I consulted a few other black gay writers I know in other parts of the country and asked them how to handle the situation with him. Without exception each man urged me to cut off the relationship. One peer opined that Landon and I come from opposing cultural, political, and ideological spectrums of the African American community, and although each of us was engaged in artistic projects that were worthy and necessary I would never change his ideas, nor he mine. Though I hesitated, I eventually sent Landon an email claiming that due to the shortage of members in our group I felt it was best to shut down the website and go our separate ways.

Until recently American society has been loathed to openly discuss class. This changed at the beginning of the twenty-first century when the Bush-Gore battle over the White House illuminated the red state-blue state divide between Americans, revealing cultural and class tensions that hitherto simmered beneath the surface. Now, in the strangling grip of the Great Recession, Americans’ awareness of class differences and cultural distinctions couldn’t be more obvious. Democrat vs. Republican, wine vs. beer, city vs. country, Smart Cars vs. SUVs, cultural schisms in the United States lay bare for citizens of all regions and demographics to debate, defend, and debunk. Those of us who pride ourselves on being culturally aware recognize that no group is a monolith. Democrats come in many strips, as do Republicans. Black in the South distinguish themselves from Northern blacks through language, dialect, dress, and other regionalisms. The black community in the twenty-first century, more politically and economically powerful now than at any other time in its long history in the United States, continues to expose the nation and the world to its wonderfully rich, diverse culture. Though the nation has been slow to embrace the Gay Rights Movement, in recent years it has gained momentum, evidenced primarily by same-sex marriage victories in seventeen states and the District of Columbia. Gays and lesbians environ every political, economic, and social sphere, yet I believe the dominant culture refuses to view gays as a diverse population. For them, Rosie O’Donnell represents all lesbians and Carson Kressley epitomizes all gay men. In my view, diminishing the scope of homosexuality makes it much easier for homophobes to attack the LGBT community and more difficult for gays and lesbians to break out of stereotypical tropes.

Some place the origins of the black gay male aesthetic in the Harlem Renaissance, where literary luminaries Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, and Richard Bruce Nugent founded a literary and artistic style replicated by today’s authors. In the years following the Second World War in what many consider the most culturally and politically conservative period in US history, there was a shift in black arts, one more stridently political and radical than had been previously celebrated during the Harlem Renaissance. It was during this era that author James Baldwin rose to prominence. Baldwin’s work protests racism, subsumes the full breadth of African American culture, and unapologetically embraces homosexuality. Influenced by the works of Henry James and his own excursions throughout Europe, Baldwin’s work is artful, nuanced, and highly literate. Unlike some authors of the Harlem Renaissance era who discussed sexuality in their work remained coy on the subject of their own sexuality, Baldwin was the first black literary giant who openly disclosed his homosexuality and demanded the world accept him, all parts of him, for who he was. James Baldwin remained America’s most notable black gay
In thirteen candid and provocative essays, author Jarrett Neal reports on the status of black gay men in the new millennium, examining classism among black gay men, racism within the gay community, representations of the black male body within gay pornography, and patriarchal threats to the survival of both black men and gay men. What Color Is Your Hoodie? employs the author’s own quest for visibility—through bodybuilding, creative writing, and teaching, among other pursuits—as the genesis for an insightful and critical dialogue that ultimately symbolizes the entire black gay community’s struggle for recognition and survival.

Praise for What Color Is Your Hoodie?

“Truthful, blunt, and thought-provoking. This unusual book is a good read that may actually change minds.”
—Terri Schlichenmeyer, The Bookworm Sez

“A gifted writer. Neal wants to promote dialogue, for gay people to listen to each other, to share stories and memorialize our victories and injustices. Homophobia, misogyny, and racism are all intertwined, so if we want to combat them, we must truly embrace diversity, which can only be accomplished if, as Neal strongly urges, all LGBTQ people learn to work together.”
—Brian Bromberger, Bay Area Reporter

“There’s much to love and think about in What Color is Your Hoodie? from an academic perspective as well as the street view. And one is as valid as the other, because if we can’t grasp both, we really can’t get a handle on either.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

“A unique insightfulness about often-unexamined experiences. Neal’s strong embrace of the personal as political and of popular media as culturally critical also drives him to explore queer racism and black homophobia, class conflict, and the effects of marginalization on self-esteem and self-expression. Moments of the collection shine as either memoir or sociological treatise.”
—Publishers Weekly

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writer and since his death in 1987 has had the mantel of black gay elder statesman bestowed upon him by contemporary black gay writers and artists.

In the 1990s, author E. Lynn Harris gained notoriety with his first novel, *Invisible Life*. Though born in Flint, Michigan, Harris was raised in the South and remained a Southern boy at heart all his life. Like Baldwin his novels candidly explore the lives and struggles of gay and bisexual African American men. Harris’ frank writing style and his willingness to expose previously taboo topics such as homophobia within the black church and down low behavior among straight-identified black men resonated throughout the black community and, like Baldwin, earned him both praise and scorn from African Americans across political, social, and intellectual terrains.

Comparisons between Baldwin and Harris abound, yet a closer look reveals that these two authors couldn’t be more different. While Baldwin’s characters migrate from the Deep South to New York City and various European locals, Harris locates his characters squarely within urban sections of the United States. Baldwin’s heroes engage in sexual relationships with white men and women; Harris’s characters maintain relationships exclusively with other African Americans. As concerns sexual intimacy in his works, Baldwin either hints at it or uses rococo descriptions to convey it to readers. Harris, on the other hand, never shies away from an opportunity to expose his readers to sex, especially same sex couplings; his language and descriptions are graphic and titillating. Perhaps the main difference between these authors is their approach to writing in general. Owing to a childhood in which books became his constant companions, Baldwin’s writing is controlled, elevated, and highly literate. By contrast, Harris’ writing is relaxed: he floods his novels with urban vernacular and crafts characters and plots that are inspired by torrid daytime soap operas. Even some of the titles of his novels (*What Becomes of the Broken Hearted, I Say a Little Prayer*) are borrowed from popular R&B hits, localizing his work in a black urban sensibility. Though many black and gay readers and scholars celebrate Harris as Baldwin’s twenty-first century scion, this appellation is hastily applied and diminishes the individual contributions of both authors.

I have long held the belief that black gay men can be placed in two general categories: Baldwin boys and Harris homies. While race, gender, and sexual orientation serve as their nexus, each group, like rival fraternities, promotes an ethos and aesthetic in opposition to its counterpart. Baldwin boys are often accused of being race traitors; they use proper English, date outside of their race, travel abroad, read lofty books, watch art house and foreign language films, listen to jazz and classical music and buy their clothes from stores like Banana Republic. Harris homies date black men exclusively, watch BET and Tyler Perry films, attend church regularly, groove to hip hop, gospel, and R&B, wear oversized T-shirts and baggy jeans. Although these designations are by no means rigidly adhered to, they broadly identify the aesthetic cultural markers of black gay men in America. Dissimilarity among black gay men also extends geographically: just as blacks in the South have a cultural ethos distinct from those who live on the East coast or in the Southwest, black gay men differ by region. Brothers in Washington, DC environ either Dupont Circle or northern Virginia. The contrast between brothers in Oakland and San Francisco is quite obvious to those who live in northern California. In Chicago a definite schism exists between black gay men who live in upscale North Side neighborhoods and those who live within the Black Belt on the South Side. The conglomeration of black gay men into two distinct cliques prompts multiple questions among them: Are Harris homies more black than Baldwin boys? Do Baldwin boys have more education and higher income? Do Harris homies have bad credit? Do
Baldwin boys hate their race? Are Harris homies really in denial of their homosexuality? Do Baldwin boys consider themselves black first or gay first? Unchallenged, these absurd questions become insults. We call each other wanna-be thugs and stuck-up Oreos, Sambos and Uncle Toms. The epithets we hurl at each other signify not only the insidiousness of racism and homophobia but the self-injury black gay men as a whole suffer and commit each day. Primarily, education and class are the issues that wedge the members of our community. A black gay man’s ability or inability to access one or both of them shapes his cultural identity and his engagement with others. Yet more than any other issue, the question of racial allegiance centralizes the friction between these two groups, with Harris homies casting aspersions on Baldwin boys’ commitment to the black race who, in turn, affirm their right to express blackness in their own way while simultaneously deriding Harris homies for taking such a narrow and, frankly, essentialist position on race. The fact of our common heritage and sexual orientation does little, it seems, to unify black gay men. We are of the same, yet we are not the same.

People are different and cultures are different, but what good does it do to highlight these differences, especially when doing so can potentially broaden the schism between them? The simple answer to this question is that celebrating difference is important, especially in a society that is becoming increasingly homogenous through corporatization. No two people are the same and no two black gay men’s experiences are the same. The United States thrives on difference and brazenly trumpets its singularity across the globe, yet our culture, just like every other culture, hypocritically demands conformity among its citizens in every possible way. We insist immigrants speak fluent English and adopt our individualistic Horatio Alger personal philosophy. The dominant culture regularly punishes citizens who are not white, male, Christian, heterosexual, wealthy, and able bodied. Social movements inspired by women, racial and sexual minorities, and the working class have advanced identity politics in the United States, yet these groups still cope with discrimination. The rise of women into positions of power in politics, academia, finance, and other professions has not eliminated sexism, which still pervades every socioeconomic area of society decades after the first wave of feminism swept the nation. The African American community continues to fight for equality and an end to racial discrimination in spite of Barack Obama’s presidency and the ascension of blacks into the middle and upper economic classes. Those who inhabit the LGBT community enjoy more freedom and acceptance now than ever before, yet in most states anti-gay legislation fails to safeguard gays and lesbians against workplace discrimination, hate crimes, and other abuses. Achievements made by a few members of a group do not erase the brutal reality from which the group as a whole still suffers.

The black gay community, like all groups, mirrors variances in class, and the result is a community as multicultural as the entire US population, steeped in tradition and subject to the same biases as other groups. Black gay men risk internalizing the racist, homophobic ethos of the culture whenever we refuse to support and embrace one another regardless of our differences and choose instead to see each other as pretentious snobs wearing Banana Republic ties or ill-mannered thugs plodding around in Timberland boots. A critical scene in Marlon Rigg’s 1989 documentary *Tongues Untied* illustrates adversarial relationships among some black gay men. Riggs quotes Joseph Beam’s “Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart” in voice over, recalling walking down Castro Street and encountering another black gay men walking in the opposite direction. The men had previously met and spoken to each other several times at a local gay club, yet when he approached Riggs the other man averted his eyes and passed him as if they were complete strangers. Failing to recognize members of one’s own community (“You ain’t gon speak?) is an unforgivable betrayal among black men regardless of sexual orientation or class. A
nod of the head accompanied by a slightly whispered, “‘Sup?” serves as currency among black men more valuable than silver or gold. This gesture—practiced only by African American men and a source of envy and endless fascination among men of other races—informs black men that no matter what our station in life, regardless of our differences, pasts, success, or failures, we belong, flesh and spirit, to this group. United by a history of bondage, lynching, degradation, and disenfranchisement, African American men share a bond so sacrosanct that to openly discuss our tacit codes of identification, even in these pages, is tantamount to heresy. The loss of brotherhood, I know from personal experience, is a common fear among gay youths, as is the feeling that no one else in the world is like them. When I first realized that I was attracted to men (I wasn’t yet prepared to call myself gay, for I believe the term gay connotes alliance with social, political, and historical systems that I, a sheltered adolescent, wasn’t ready to make) one of my biggest fears was that I would be all alone, ostracized from my community and loved ones. In my environment, no one was like me. One of the many wonderful aspects of gay culture is the unyielding support we give to one another, even to gay men we may not know. At the height of the AIDS crisis, which all but decimated an entire generation of gay men, those who suffered from the disease relied on an extensive support network. Scores of men throughout the community took turns feeding, bathing, comforting, and assisting those afflicted with the disease any way they could, whether they were close friends, passing acquaintances, or perfect strangers. In writing this essay I am constantly reminded of a phrase that resounds throughout every region of black gay America: brother to brother. The last thing black gay men should do is make enemies of one another. Racism and homophobia are as widespread and toxic today as they were when Hughes, Nugent, and their contemporaries were forging the black gay male world we all now inhabit. Even as the members of the Harlem Renaissance squabbled among themselves, embarked on their own literary projects, failed or succeed as artists, and faced their own personal demons, they never wavered in their support and acceptance of one another, collaborating on the publication of Fire!! and defending one another publicly in interviews. In the decades following the Harlem Renaissance, when James Baldwin rose to literary prominence, Langston Hughes had become the most recognizable and celebrated member of the Harlem Renaissance and the nation’s most esteemed black poet. Though Hughes and Baldwin occasionally took umbrage with each other’s work, they admired one another because they realized that their individual projects and commitment to civil rights contributed to a much larger project, one surpassing the expansion of civil rights, literature, or identity politics. I like to think that if Baldwin had lived to read E. Lynn Harris’ works he would have embraced Harris in the same way Harris embraced Baldwin’s work and credited both Baldwin and Hughes for paving the way for him as a black gay writer. In the final analysis, the methods employed to gain visibility are not so important. What is important is that black gay men as a group gain visibility and control of our representation to mitigate the struggle for tolerance for not only our brothers but for all people.

When I recount my experiences with Landon, ambivalence weighs heavily upon me. I had been searching for my true literary peers for quite a long time and felt overwhelmingly discouraged that in a city as large as Chicago I could only find one black gay man who shared my devotion to creative writing. Though we weren’t completely simpatico, Landon was one of my own, my contemporary, my ally, my brother. His unwillingness to accept me for who I am and his essentialist view of blackness—limited to ghetto, working class, anti-white African American art and experience—wounded me deeply. But I cannot place all the blame for the demise of our kinship on Landon. I blame myself as much as him for severing our line of communication. Seeking to avoid a potentially ugly confrontation, I summarily cut off all contact with Landon.
rather than sit down with him brother to brother and have a thorough discussion of our respective poetry collections. We may not have had a meeting of the minds, and we probably would have ended our association anyway, but at least Landon would have been given an opportunity to explain his comments. He could have better articulated his animus toward the black middle-class and black gay men like me. I denied him the chance to explain why he harbors suspicions about us and why he feels abandoned by us. I feel the same way. I didn’t give myself the chance to tell Landon that my allegiance to the black race does not obviate my embrace of other races, cultures, and histories. I should have told him that in my view any experience of a person who considers himself African American is a black experience and that blackness is not a litmus test one must pass based on pigmentation, phenotype, working class status or a legacy of discrimination. I should have told him that I will never allow my race, gender, class, or sexual orientation to define who I am or limit my artistic aims. But instead of dismantling the wall between the regions of black gay culture we represent, Landon and I piled on more bricks. We missed our opportunity to find harmony in our differences and assuage our mutual anger, longing and frustration.

Jarrett Neal is the author of What Color Is Your Hoodie? Essays on Black Gay Identity, recently released from Chelsea Station Editions. He earned a BA in English from Northwestern University and an MFA in Writing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in Chelsea Station, The Gay and Lesbian Review, Requited Journal, The Good Men Project, and other publications, including the Lambda Literary Award-nominated anthologies For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Still Not Enough and Black Gay Genius: Answering Joseph Beam’s Call. He lives in Oak Park, IL.

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“One reads Love, Christopher Street to see how other people, like and unlike yourself, encountered and endured and learned from New York, and that’s why this extremely varied anthology is always interesting, even when tangential, and why it’s often moving.”
—Andrew Holleran, The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide

“No matter what your relationship is with New York City, you’re bound to find something here to make you smile, laugh or be homesick. And if you are one of those few people who have no relationship with the Big Apple, maybe this will spark your desire to establish one.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

“Love, Christopher Street will leave readers impressed, inspired and enlightened. Despite their differences in age, gender and ethnic origin, these essayists all share a fondness for New York, and their combined stories are proof that the city’s immeasurable impact on LGBT art and artists continues today.”
—Christopher Verleger, Edge

A TOP TEN FAVORITE BOOK ON THE 2013 AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION OVER THE RAINBOW LIST OF LGBT BOOKS FOR ADULT READERS

For the Ferryman
A Personal History
Charles Silverstein

www.chelseastationeditions.com

A memoir from the noted psychologist and co-author of The Joy of Gay Sex about the author’s activism on gay issues in the medical and psychiatry professions and his personal relationship with a younger man and his partner’s decline into addictions.

“Charles Silverstein has written a memoir about the great love of his life—an eccentric, androgynous genius whom Charles adored and cared for despite all his flaws and addictions. Most writers idealize their lovers, especially if they’ve died young, but Silverstein presents his William with all his charm and sexual allure and intellectual brilliance—and all his maddening faults. I wept at the end of this brave, honest book—and I suspect you will too.”
—Edmund White, author of City Boy and Sacred Monsters
Chase M. Ledin has published work in *Glitterwolf Magazine*, *A Literation Magazine*, and *RoguePoetry Review*. He received a Bachelor’s from The Ohio State University, and is currently a master’s student at King’s College London. He currently lives in London, United Kingdom.
Busted, in Holborn

Forget what you know about this city. The lights are just a dim decay of lives splitting open to reveal they are beehives by day, solemn by night, awkward mausoleums encumbered with emotions that do not justify death, or songs that sometimes saunter through windows and remind us that we were never rich enough to pull the red beats of intelligence into focus.

This city, as with billfolds and eyes—brine-crusted; pocketed with lube and flesh; harboring quarters of cheese dust and paper in the creases—speaks and recedes into everything as common as Home. This city is not complex. We all speak of bursting cities with difference: its spaces rupture into half-resolved urgings scuffed and unwilling and taut against the restraints of moaning. But the aches will never set in a mind that constantly exhumes street histories: or, in other words, do not believe in glass; glass breaks as suddenly as fingernails, polished and darkly transposed against the sun. Glass bows when distorted, taking for its object every life that imagines love and lust, and wants.

—Chase M. Ledin
Fortune’s Bastard
a novel by
Gil Cole

“Hold onto your codpiece—Shakespeare has never been hotter. Gil Cole’s lusty yet literate Fortune’s Bastard is a thrilling, imaginative, and above all romantic homage to the great bard.”
—Wayne Hoffman, author of Sweet Like Sugar and Hard

“Gil Cole’s adventure is epic, operatic, and Shakespearean. He writes with complete confidence as he rolls out a grand pageant of heroism and love on the fifteenth century Mediterranean. On every page I found fresh surprises that kept my pulse racing.”
—David Pratt, author of Bob the Book and My Movie

Pacific Rimming
a novella by
Tom Cardamone

“From the torrid depths of the Manhattan gay club scene, Cardamone snatches the precious jewel of wisdom that Blake prophesied could only be found in excess. You’ll find no political correctness, smugness or marriage activism in Cardamone’s gay universe: this is the visceral underbelly of gay life, and his language makes it shimmer like paradise.”
—Trebor Healey, author of A Horse Named Sorrow and Faun

“Exhilarating! Pacific Rimming is an eloquent, gorgeous reminder of why, when it comes to the mystery of desire, we persist in doing all the abject, crazy, beautiful things we do.”
—Paul Russell, author of The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov
A Conversation with Robert Levy
Interview by Steve Berman

Author and publisher Steve Berman recently spoke to writer Robert Levy about his new novel, *The Glittering World*.

**Steve Berman:** Hello, Robert, before we begin, why don’t you tell *Chelsea Station* readers a bit about yourself—try not to repeat too much of the bio on your novel.

**Robert Levy:** Hi Steve! Thanks so much for having me! Okay, here goes... I’m a born-and-bred New Yorker, who was almost born at a Knicks playoff game (which for some reason my mom thought was a great idea to attend whilst two weeks past her due date). Aside from college and a year in San Francisco, I’ve been in Brooklyn ever since. Now I live there with my husband and two children, and can still walk to my parents’ place where I grew up.

**Berman:** So, *Library Journal* said of your new novel, *The Glittering World*: “Fast paced, yet it also succeeds as a reflective tale of self-discovery...Well crafted, atmospheric, and whimsical,
this will attract readers who enjoy Neil Gaiman and Mark Z. Danielewski.” Are you a fan of Gaiman and Danielewski?

**Levy:** I am a big fan of both gentlemen, which I guess shows in my work! First, Gaiman’s Sandman series is in my opinion one of the great works of twentieth-century literature, and has always held a special place in my heart and on my shelf (which reminds me it’s probably time for a rereading); I recently read *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* and was really impressed with it as well. As for Danielewski, *House of Leaves* is one of the very few novels I found to be both legitimately experimental and deeply engaging (I think I’m more of a traditionalist than I care to admit). Not bad authors to be compared to in my book.

**Berman:** And let’s touch on the notion of self-discovery. Dark fantasy and horror often presents the protagonist as an Outsider figure. And minorities, whether ethnic or sexual, are naturally disposed to looking at the world from “without.” How does *The Glittering World* handle this theme as it relates to a gay protagonist?

**Levy:** I attended a panel at Readercon in 2013 that was concerned with the difference between dark fantasy and horror, and Jeanne Cavelos said something that really stuck with me: in dark fantasy, the story is from the monster’s point of view. I think this applies deeply to *The Glittering World* (a book that could be classified as either dark fantasy or horror), which has four protagonist of varying sexualities who in one way or another all grapple with monstrous things about themselves and each other. So in a way I think the novel tackles self-discovery through a number of different lenses, identity being the chief topic of the work. What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be otherwise? You know, the little questions in life.

**Berman:** When did you come out? And did reading any particular books help? Was there a specific literary character you most identified with?

**Levy:** I came out as bisexual in high school, and gay in college, and although I sometimes find myself rolling my eyes I have to say I do think there’s something to these crazy kids who refuse to label themselves altogether. The first “gay novel” I read was probably James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, and insofar that it was my first and that it’s brilliant it probably had...
the greatest effect on me (although it’s really, really tragic as well). As for literary characters, I remember identifying with the character Larry in Lanford Wilson’s excellent play *Burn This*, which I saw when I was thirteen or fourteen. Larry was the first kind of smart, reasonably happy and fully-formed queer sophisticate that I can remember seeing myself in.

**Berman:** Writing is not an easy craft. In some ways it’s very isolating, which is a thematic element in horror tales and could be seen in *The Glittering World*. How do you cope with the isolation of writing?

**Levy:** Drinking lots of fluids (water, coffee, whiskey), taking walks, and trying to be present when you’re actually in the company of other human beings. It’s funny, but the isolation that comes with writing bleeds into the rest of my life: sometimes I’ll be with my family or friends and my brain is still working through some problem in my work. Social media, for all its faults, can be a great help because you can work through writing-related issues with a score of fellow writers just by pressing a few buttons.

**Berman:** If I were to sneak into your office and steal a book, what book would hurt the most to lose and why?

**Levy:** The monogrammed thesaurus I got for my bar mitzvah. It was the first fancy book I ever received, and I used it ceaselessly throughout high school and college.

**Berman:** And the reverse: if I were the book fairy (and some have called me that to my face), what book would you wish I left by your computer?

**Levy:** Barring some obscenely expensive item that I would then hock, like the Gutenberg Bible, I’ll go with the new edition of Daniel Clowes’ brilliant comics series *Eightball*.

**Berman:** So what is your next project? And while we wait for it to release, what do you recommend we read to curb the withdrawal pangs?

**Levy:** Hoo boy, after pretty monomaniacally writing *The Glittering World*, I am working on a bunch of different things right now, including a new novel, a television pilot, and a screenplay, all of which are inching forward. In other words, it might be a while. Why not check out Christopher Barzak’s delicious new book *Wonders of the Invisible World*? I’m reading it right now and it’s up there with his best work.

**Berman:** Thank you, Robert, for writing such a wonderful tale of queer horror and for talking with me!

**Levy:** Thank you so much for your kind words, book fairy—oops, I mean Steve—and to *Chelsea Station* for hosting me!

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Steve Berman is the author of *Vintage: A Ghost Story* and is one of the foremost anthology editors in the field of queer speculative fiction.

Robert Levy is an author of unsettling stories and plays whose work has been seen Off-Broadway. A Harvard graduate subsequently trained as a forensic psychologist, his work has been called “frank and funny” (*Time Magazine*), “idiosyncratic and disarming” (*The New York Times*), “ambitious and clever” (*Variety*), “smart” (*The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*) and “bloody brave” (the UK’s *SFX Magazine*). His first novel, the contemporary dark fairy tale *The Glittering World* was published worldwide in February by Gallery/Simon & Schuster.
Last fall Craig Laurance Gidney produced a new collection of short stories, *Skin Deep Magic*, a follow up to his earlier collection published by Lethe Press, *Sea, Swallow Me*. Although both volumes are slim in size—each is under two hundred pages—they each contain ten stories apiece, both original stories and reprints, that examine the intersection of the mythic and mundane worlds through the lenses of sexual orientation and race. “Magic is more than skin-deep” proclaims the ad copy of the latter collection, and indeed these stories are anything but shallow.

Gidney casts his net far and wide (so to speak) in *Sea, Swallow Me*, both in space and time. Several stories are set in his native Washington, DC, or nearby Baltimore, but one occurs on an antebellum plantation (“The Safety of Thorns”), one on an unnamed island (“Sea, Swallow Me”), and another is set in a medieval Japanese monastery (“A Bird of Ice”). Each of the stories’ protagonists eventually meets the divine, be it an African sea god, a Japanese *yokai*, or their Muse. Meeting the fantastic can be terrifying—in the title story the protagonist is, in fact,
swallowed up by the sea, before being swallowed by the god he encounters—but doing so provides healing (spiritual and physical). An especially poignant example of this idea happens in “Circuit Boy Without a Safety Net” where a gay teen obsessed with Lena Horne (simultaneously his patron saint and tempting demon) finds himself when he finds her.

The protagonists in Gidney's second collection likewise meet the paranormal, but the accompanying ideas of terror, healing, and transformation are less overt. Other themes emerge instead, especially when the worlds of race and sexual orientation intersect with the uncanny. In two of the stories (“Psychometry, or Gone with the Dust” and “Lyes”) the theme of assimilation comes to the fore, a fraught concern for African Americans, also a new (but no less fraught) concern for the LGBT community. (Moreover, as a former academic, I totally identify with how easily one's research can take over one's life. At least my research topic didn't literally come to life, as it does for the graduate student in “Lyes.”) The theme of not belonging, and finding one's roots (if you'll pardon the pun), one's true family (which is not always one's blood family) in “Sapling” will also resonate strongly with LGBT readers.

*Skin Deep Magic*, like *Sea, Swallow Me*, ranges throughout time and space: Gidney explores Victorian London (“Death and Two Maidens”) as well as the Harlem Renaissance (“Conjuring Shadows” and “Coalrose”) and the inner city in “Sugardaddy.” However, two stories range even farther than conventional geography or the historical past by leading the reader into the actual worlds created by “Mauve's Quilt” and “The Inscribed Man.” Both collections also contain stories about literary figures, comparing them to workers of magic. “Strange Alphabets” and “Zora's Destiny” both retell pivotal events in the early lives of Arthur Rimbaud and Zora Neale Houston, respectively: Rimbaud was “cursed by poetry, and it felt divine,” whereas Houston learns that she is a “conjure woman.” It stands to reason that if the *objets d'art* (whether a quilt, sculpture, or piece of literature) depicted in Gidney's stories exude magic, then their creators must have something of magic in them too.

And so too does Gidney work his own brand of magic: he writes on several levels, from the wordplay inherent in some of the stories' titles to the different levels of meaning within the stories themselves. Make no mistake: magic permeates each of these stories.

Keith Glaeske is a medievalist and collector of speculative fiction currently living in Washington, DC. His articles about medieval literature have been published in *Medieval Perspectives*, *Traditio*, and *Ériu*. He regularly reviews books for *Chelsea Station*, *Lambda Literary Review*, and other sites.
“J.R. Greenwell does a lovely job of relaying the comic as well as tragicomic aspects of the over-the-top dramatic world of drag queens, and he nails it exactly.”
—Felice Picano, author of True Stories

“Winning, witty, and wise. Greenwell has a talent for creating immediately recognizable yet slightly weird around the edges characters, and he puts them through some wonderfully silly paces as well as some heartbreaking ones. His prose is admirably restrained, conveying a great deal yet never sounding overwritten. But it’s his characters that shine and sparkle like sequins in the spotlight. If you’re looking for a light read that has some substance behind its humor, you’ll hardly go wrong with this collection.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

“Eleven clever and engaging stories based in small Southern towns, some sweet and emotional, most amusing and often full of campy bitchiness! The stories are character-driven, with a diverse cast that includes drag queens with attitudes to reckon with, clueless parents trying to deal with their “fabulous” kids, criminals without a lick of common sense, and men “coming out” late in life. This is a home run for this first-time talented author, and a Southern-fried treat for his readers. Five stars out of five!”
—Bob Lind, Echo

“A slew of bizarre stories, some hilarious, some heartrending, and almost all of them as original as an Ionesco play with a good dose of David Lynch trompe l’oeil thrown in. Today’s gay literature needs more voices from Greenwell’s South, and here’s hoping Who the Hell is Rachel Wells? has called them out of the wilderness.”
—Kyle Thomas Smith, Edge

“If you haven’t picked up a copy of Who the Hell is Rachel Wells? yet, then allow me to tell you that you should.”
—Nathan Burgoine, reviewer and author of Light

“Who the Hell is Rachel Wells? is a collection of eleven short stories about being gay in the South and I loved each of them... Greenwell gives us a wonderful cast of characters with heart and we laugh and cry with them. Written with wit and emotion, we are taken into the world of Southern drag queens and feel what they feel as they navigate life.”
—Amos Lassen, Reviews by Amos Lassen
Five fascinating tales linked by the sea. An aging architect must decide to give up his grief, even if it means losing the vestiges of a lover’s memory. An object of erotic fixation galvanizes men against the isolation of exile on a cruise liner. As he watches the disintegration of his picket-fence fantasy, an ex-soldier looks to the sea for absolution.

Praise for Part the Hawser, Limn the Sea

“In these stories, it isn’t necessarily the big events that are the most revelatory: it’s the glance, the nod, the two men sitting on a boat while ‘neither of them was making an attempt at conversation.’ Dan Lopez peoples his sea narratives with gay men, both white and of color, and in doing so reexamines the genre, not unlike Annie’s Proulx’s reexamination of the cowboy narrative in Brokeback Mountain. An impressive collection.”
—Ken Harvey, Lambda Literary

“Don’t be deceived by its diminutive size. Dan Lopez’s just released debut story collection Part the Hawser, Limn the Sea is a powerhouse of literary dexterity. There are five stories collected here, and all are linked by the sea, the seduction of water and tide, and the release of waves and surf. It takes immense skill and intuitive finesse to formulate such characterization and story development in the span of just a few pages. There is not a word wasted or a false note throughout this 60-page slice of gay fiction. Lopez demonstrates an artistry not often found in a debut collection; there is cohesion, passion, and searing pain in his writing.”
—Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter

“While the setting doesn’t define these stories, the sea maintains a constant presence. It is both serene and treacherous. And the characters of these stories are too distracted with their own intimacies to notice it. Each story is so delicately layered with tension that it’s worth multiple reads.”
—Jonathan Harper, Chelsea Station

“These stories are unique and powerful in their simplicity, and I found this to be an impressive collection I couldn’t stop thinking about once finished.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

AVAILABLE FROM CHELSEA STATION EDITIONS
Jim Nawrocki’s poetry has appeared in the anthologies, *The Place That Inhabits Us: Poems of the San Francisco Bay Watershed* and *Art & Understanding: Literature from the First Twenty Years*. It has also appeared in *Poetry*, *Kyoto Journal*, *The James White Review*, *America*, *Arroyo Literary Review*, the website poetrydaily.com, and a variety of other magazines and journals. He is a contributing writer to the *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* and lives in San Francisco.
Body Blow

I’m reading Whitman’s *Specimen Days* as the city empties out all around me and Memorial Day looms, the big green book splayed open like a Bible on my kitchen island as I hover over it, and my archaic landline, suddenly alive in its cradle, jars me away from old white-beard and his fevered soldiers. I’m holding the phone in the main room, looking back now at Whitman left open in the kitchen, my doctor’s voice on the other end, like it’s farther away than this city—he says, *I don’t have good news*—I think, *Not now* and remember that morning, how I’d had to lower my jeans under a blanket in the room kept cold for CT scans, *computerized tomography*, my body on the moving slab drawn slowly into the giant donut that powered up to an ominous hum and sent its light inside of my abdomen, searching for the source of the strange ache that had nudged me for weeks. He says, *I’m dancing around here, trying to avoid certain words*... And I start to fill in the blanks. *Just be straight with me*, I say. *I think it’s cancer* is his answer. And I hear about the growths visible on the film he sees, one in my colon, more scattered across the lobes of my liver. I imagine them looking like showers and storm fronts on a Doppler radar. More words emerge: *prognosis, treatment, time*. He says, *I don’t know enough. It’s too soon*. I feel the days ahead as if they’re gathering weight. Is someone with you?, he asks, and there will be soon enough, but when I hang up, I’m alone in a very new and sudden quietude. This is a holiday, everyone venturing away to enjoy the gift of one more day, one I’ll have as well, and I think of a place, palm-lined, or at least warm, perhaps a beach, somewhere I’d rather be, where I can shed my clothes, take my body out into tropical light, to the edge of the water, into a breeze. I want it to carry me into forgetfulness. A decade ago, I posed nude for Bill, a painter friend, stepped out of jeans and t-shirt, taking direction to sit backwards on a chair, chin atop arms atop the curved crown of the chair’s back, face hidden, light across my shoulders, thighs, arms, and my bowed head with its brown and precise brush cut. Months later I saw the finished canvas at a gallery on Union Square, and stood before it with a vague thrill of strangeness, seeing my pose, anonymous and faceless and yet me, just one of many men, each of us rendered like some spare Southwestern *retablo* of a saint. Bill had added, in a late flourish, a tattoo on my leg, an image of a carved log, a sprig of new leaf rising from it, something, shaman-like and resonant of blessing. I think of that portrait now, on someone’s wall, or in storage among Bill’s collected works, a separate body of mine, going its own way into a life I might have had. I imagine a time, in some bed in some room, when, like one of Whitman’s young soldiers, caught within a failing body, I will look up and maybe see the old whitened father himself, the poet at my bedside, his face bright with the love of comrades. I would have no other God but this, forgive him for his duty of having to move from ward to ward, visiting upon me just a small interval, enough for a smile, a caress of his old hand upon my own thin and uncertain one, perhaps a brush of his capacious beard upon my yellowing face, his whisper, as soft as a breeze, just up against my ear, not a kiss, but a quiet and tender question: *Tell me your name, son.*

—Jim Nawrocki
There is a billboard. A white bed in a white room, rumpled white sheets, and white pillows, in a white room. The pillows have deep hollows, impressions, where a heavy head would lay in its comfort. But the bed is empty. White.

“Is that an ad for 400 thread-count,” asks a fellow student. We are in a shabby corner of 90’s Brooklyn, on a high-school field trip, going somewhere, I forget. This is all I remember about any of this trip, except for the Spring New York air, the urine and the black tar tang of the river brack, of a climb into the crown of Liberty herself.

I can’t stop staring at the image. I feel its loss. I somehow know the people who aren’t there, without ever seeing them. But it is a false knowing. I am 16.
Felix Gonzalez-Torres created this billboard to honor his lover, Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS-related complications. He said of his work, “Above all else, it is about leaving a mark that I existed: I was here. I was hungry. I was defeated. I was happy. I was sad. I was in love. I was afraid. I was hopeful. I had an idea.” Felix died four years later, from "AIDS-related complications".

In the gay community we have our first stories, like any other: first kiss, first love, our 'first time', but we have others ones, too: our coming out, our second 'first time', our first hate crime, and our first death from AIDS. Mine was Michael, who lived across the hall in my college dorm, who came over at three in the morning to ask if he could cuddle, just cuddle, nothing more. Who had smelly hobbit feet. Who went to class donning an apron that said, “Kiss Me. I’m Irish.” Who wrote me unrequited love poems and left them on my empty pillow. Scrubby fuzz on his chin, gap-teethed, grinning, when he drank gin in a plastic flask, urging to us all the virtues of pure democracy. Five years later he was found dead in his hotel room in Washington DC. Working as an aide for a Georgia state senator’s campaign. His body lay in the middle of the king, legs together, arms at his side, little plastic baggies, a spoon, a rolled up twenty. He had been diagnosed three weeks before. It was the 90's. We thought AIDS was a death sentence, and Michael decided to finish the line himself.

My generation was that in-between: after the education and before the hesitant sigh of relief, before Atripla and Videx and Emtriva and Ziagen and Retrovir, before PREP and Truvada and ARV. We had condoms and celebrities, PSAs and polished hair. And the word death. Death. In pink helvetica. In essence, we were terrified to have sex. But we were alive. We were safe. We did everything safe. I prided myself on doing everything safe.

My roommate is also of my generation. He went to art school--a writer, a painter. Then, he stopped. Now, he cooks. Rice, spicy noodles, curries that tear away the tops of the tongue, and meat. Lots of meat. Busies his hands. Hums to himself to block out other noises.

He didn’t want to know. Whatever the virus was cooking in his guts, he pretended wasn't there, the hiss inside, in his ears. He sang louder, in clubs with their bass thicker than the blood he never tested, in squealing bars, in cloudy porn shoot bedrooms. Then, another image, an abacus of him dying, six T-cells, 98 pounds, two weeks to live, a countdown, beads sliding along string, a litany of Latin syllables mapped over his body, his throat, his skin, his stomach waging war with the hiss that folded out of sound and into a breath heavier than any sex he ever had. In the generation before us, Irwan was supposed to die. But he didn't.

Torres created many works about the absence of his lover. One was a giant pile of Hershey Kisses, in the corner of the gallery, the glinting silver chocolate bulbs, Ross' favorite, each glint a cue in the dint. The viewer was instructed to take. Eat. Then toss the
wrapper in another pile, a smaller one. Little silver scraps. Rubbed to tiny balls by the pointed fingers of those very much alive.

Dear Felix,

Now, in the ground, then, on the bed, which were you walked on the more?

Irwan quit making art after his diagnosis. That is, save one work. A small painting, on wood, the top of a pill box, in a hospital pink background, with the first letters of each day, one on each flap: M, T, W, T, F, S, S. The hiss. I wondered with indignation why he quit making art. I feel the answer lies in this last painting, somewhere, in the names of days. I stare at the little boxes with their letters, planned, filled with pills, his life. His only way to life. A different kind of death.

Michael’s head pressed the hotel bed’s pillow, did it not? With no lover next to him. Imagine the photograph. A bed. A pillow. A billboard never made. Is it easier to know the impression of two? Is it more painful to see the hollow of one? One without the other makes the one alone, unknown. Is that the hiss?

The pillbox. It tells me. Art has changed. The reminder is not the loss, but that we now are alive. What of this difference? Pillow to pillbox, death to some kind of life. Can art leave a mark on behalf of lives not gone, but unseen? Is that where the suffering lives on? An AIDS-related complication.

I did everything safe. I am healthy. I have pride. I have been in the crown of Liberty herself. And the view from there is lonely. I crawl onto my bed and impress my whole body, pitch my head into the pillow, dig in deep. My false knowing. I have pointed the finger, many times. And I am sorry.

Miah Jeffra is a writer, artist and educator hailing from Baltimore and living in San Francisco. A 2014 Lambda Literary Fellow, Miah's work has most recently appeared in The North Atlantic Review, A Cappella Zoo, Edge, Fifth Wednesday, Educe and Fourteen Hills. His novel, Highlandtown, is the 2012 winner of the Clark-Gross Award. He is Artistic Director for ShadowLab, a social justice arts collective.
“A brilliant debut novel by Canadian writer Jeffrey Luscombe that explores the inner and outer life of a ‘latent homosexual,’ Joshua Moore. Luscombe revitalizes the over-romanticized ‘coming out’ novel by subjecting it to a cold shower of literary realism.”
—Dick Smart, Lambda Literary

“Shirts and Skins is a novel that will speak to anyone who has ever felt the inextricable bonds of the past, or felt the long shadow of family and home places as they strive towards the light of wholeness of identity and self-ownership. A first novel deeply felt and skillfully told, by a writer with insight, compassion, and talent to burn.”
—Michael Rowe, author of Enter, Night and Other Men’s Sons

“Shirts and Skins is authentic in its pathos, eloquent in its delivery, and well worth the read.”
—Kyle Thomas Smith, Edge

“Each story brilliantly captures a mood and paints a vivid picture... I’m not a huge fan of coming out stories, but this one I can highly recommend, because I feel it is more about overcoming a lifetime of bad choices to finally savor that sweet wine of triumph. It is about battling one’s culture and past, to find one’s identity. Shirts and Skins is a story that, I feel, everyone can relate to.”
—Alan Chin, Examiner.com

“An intriguing, at times disturbing, peek into the mind of a character who is only half aware of his own feelings. Luscombe is clearly after something different in this book: it is less about coming out than it is about going in. Josh’s repression is far more interesting than his liberation, which is a much more familiar story. In his adherence to the closet, as in his father’s depression-fueled withdrawal from the world, we see the tragedy of self-denial. Unlike his father, though, Josh eventually finds the strength to pull himself out of denial and embrace his truth. It’s a journey that still resonates for us all.”
—Lewis DeSimone, Lambda Literary

“In the depths of despair, standing outside looking in, Josh touches the hearts of those who have lost their way to their dreams and aspirations. His inability to find himself finally leads to an epiphany of his hidden, yet acknowledged, desires.”
—American Library Association GLBTRT Newsletter
“Every essay is gripping, exciting, fun to read, and, yes, entertaining. No wonder Picano is such a popular writer. *True Stories* is a masterpiece. Buy it and enjoy it.”
—Jim Piechota, *Bay Area Reporter*

“Telling truths is something that popular, prolific author and memoirist Felice Picano does extremely well. This is most evident in *True Stories: Portraits from My Past*, his latest collection of expanded personal essays and life reflections. Picano’s memory is impeccable, and his ear for dialogue just as distinctive and richly realized. Appealing and wonderfully anecdotal, the essays shared here harken back to a cloudless era when fun was freewheeling and the consequences of that fun were overcast at best. With this collection, Picano pays tribute to the many unsung heroes of his past who have long since fallen, forever etched both in memory and the occasional bout of inexplicable laughter and tears.”
—Jim Piechota, *Bay Area Reporter*
“An intensely personal collection centered on the survivor of a fascinating, chaotic time. Picano’s writing is most moving when he’s reflecting on AIDS and HIV, a theme that connects each story and has affected so many people in his life.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“Felice Picano, as his name suggests, is both a happy and piquant memoirist. Gifted with a prodigious memory and an inexhaustible curiosity, Picano observes everything—Japan, Berlin, his own family—in a fresh and indelible way.”
—Edmund White
Dennis Rhodes poems have been collected in *Spiritus Pizza and other poems*, *Entering Dennis*, and most recently, *The Letter I*. His work has been published in *The Jersey Journal*, *New York Newsday*, *Fine Gardening*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Alembic*, *Chelsea Station*, and many other publications.
Nothing

When in the drowsy aftermath of sex
some playful lover notices the scar
and traces it with his finger, asking
what’s that, I fall into the easy lie
“Oh, a remnant of childhood. It’s nothing”
I kiss him and distract him from the truth.
Nothing indeed. Gary wrestled the knife
from my hand with superhuman strength,
keeping me on this side of existence.
The surgeon asked “Does he believe in God?”
Gary said yes. “Good. That’s what saved him”
That’s how I live with this sweet nothing:
with Faith, not shame, with triumph not regret.

—Dennis Rhodes
“Dennis Rhodes’ poems show a deep love of the natural world, they also show a strong empathy with human frailty.
—Provincetown Banner

“Craig Moreau’s Chelsea Boy is a true original, in many senses of the word. It’s simultaneously a serious collection, and a book of poetry intended for readers who don’t usually read poetry at all. Moreau is a passionate, gifted poet, and with Chelsea Boy he enters terrain far too seldom poetically traversed.”
—Michael Cunningham

“Holland’s major achievement here is to build a persona that is as unabashedly gay as it is charmingly decorous. I never thought about how much I tend to worry about the speakers of gay poems—how damaged and endangered our speakers tend to be. You never worry about Holland. He seems refreshingly adult... These are the poems of a healthy, well-adjusted happy man.”
—Lambda Literary

“The same accessible, conversational, gay-as-a-box-of-birds approach that O’Hara championed, though Cotter’s poetry is not at all an imitation or a parody of O’Hara’s style.”
—Roberto Friedman, Bay Area Reporter
Chelsea Station is a new magazine devoted to gay writing. We accept for consideration original and unpublished fiction, nonfiction, poetry, essays, memoir, humor, narrative travelogue, interviews, and reviews (books, theater, television, and film) relating to gay literature and gay men.

Please query about reprints or promotional excerpts.

Submissions and queries should be sent to info@chelseastationeditions.com.

Manuscripts should be emailed as Word attachments. Please include your name, address, and email contact information on the first page of your document. Please also include a brief bio of 100 words. Please query before sending any artwork.

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Due to the volume of submissions, we are unable to respond with rejection notices. If you do not hear from us within three months of your submission, we are unable to use your submission, though you are always able to submit additional material for us to consider.

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“A remarkable collection of hard-earned, melancholic wisdom.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“Currier is a masterful essayist, adept at lingering over a meaningful detail or capturing a complex emotion in a simple phrase.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“Everything in this collection resonates with authenticity. The sections where Currier writes about AIDS are particularly powerful and heartrending.
—David Swatling, Chelsea Station

“Achingly poignant and full of humor. Currier addresses topics familiar to gay men—sex and the search thereof, love and relationships, AIDS and loss—all rendered in vivid details that ring with the clarity of Truth.”
—Hank Trout, Art & Understanding
I cannot forget that we traded clothes since I have worn the shorts several times since then. It was our last summer together and we were both gaining weight. I had bought a pair of khaki shorts too big for myself and his shorts were so tight they were making him uncomfortable. One afternoon at his summer house, we traded shorts before going out to the beach. It was one of the last times that things were perfect between us. He looked good in my shorts and I looked better in his.

That was not the first or the last time I would wear his clothes. The first year we dated one another I needed a jacket to wear to a job interview. I was a freelance writer and he was trying to steer me toward a corporate world where a job also had benefits. I did not have much money that year and he had plenty to spare. He also had a closet full of suits he had outgrown since leaving
his wife and two kids and moving into his own apartment. I had never worn a suit as expensive as the one he gave me. It was gray flannel and had a designer label inside the jacket. Of course, I needed a beautiful tie to wear with such a handsome suit, and he chose a dark blue silk one with dots from his closet. I’m not sure if the tie was a gift or not, but I never returned it to him and he never asked for it back. When he offered it to me, he said he had not worn it for some time because he had grown tired of wearing it so often. I should have understood then how I fit into his life—as something new and unusual that could lose its luster at any moment. But I didn’t. The tie still hangs in my closet, waiting for another opportunity to be worn with the suit.

He had also outgrown a drawer full of dress shirts. These were beautiful pinpoint oxford cotton. There was a blue and white striped one, a solid blue one, and a blue striped one with a white collar. The shirts were tailored along the back and the sides, which is why they were no longer of comfort to him. They fit me perfectly when I tried them on. I didn’t get these shirts at the same time that I got the suit and the tie, but they came into my possession soon thereafter. For a while I wore the shirts to a temp job and pointed out the monogrammed cuffs to my co-workers. The initials were not mine, of course, but I found them full of extravagant subtext when I explained that the letters belonged to the name of my boyfriend.

There was a period, too, where I gave him clothes. He loved to wear T-shirts from luxury destinations and I bought him many from the places we visited together or separately. I gave him shirts from Hawaii, Palm Springs, San Francisco, Key West, East Hampton, and Disney World. I could not afford to travel to all these places without his help and my gratitude was always bound up in the design I chose for him. These gifts were not without their inherent problems, however—a few faded or shrunk in the wash and were never seen again after their initial wearing. And one of the sturdier ones would haunt me for over two years—I later learned that the weekend we spent apart and the day I had chosen the shirt for him, he had spent celebrating another, younger, boyfriend’s birthday.

Six weeks after I first met him in a bar, he took me to a store and offered to buy me an outfit for my birthday. I had never had anyone take me into a clothing store with this in mind except for my mother, and since he was older and I was younger it felt both paternal and perverted, as if I were a young hustler he had discovered in a bar and wanted to make more presentable. Nonetheless, I found his gesture to be authentic, but much too extravagant for someone I had known for such a little time. I decided to only let him buy me a pair of pants. The ones that I was wearing at the time were faded and shredded at the cuffs and knees and crotch, though only the threads at my ankles were truly discernible to anyone other than the wearer. The pants that I chose were olive green khakis and I wore them about a year before they faded and shredded themselves, too, from overuse. They did not set him back too many bucks and, in retrospect, I think it was a good investment.

He gave me other gifts on other birthdays, too. One birthday he gave me a sporty and moderately expensive watch. He was not a man full of romantic or intimate notions and for a brief moment I felt as if we had exchanged rings. A watch is not an intimate gift, of course, but I took it to be an intimate gesture because there was nothing else even mimicking it in our relationship. When my next birthday rolled around I had lost the watch and he questioned me about its whereabouts when he noticed I was no longer wearing it. I said it was in need of a new battery and I would have it fixed in a few days. The watch had not stopped and it had not really been lost; it had been stolen by a trick I had picked up one night in a bar and taken back to my apartment. It took me
four paychecks to save enough money to buy a duplicate of this moderately expensive watch and by the time I had bought it, it was clear to me that our time together was finite and soon to end.

There was a time, however, when I loved him and I tried to use as many connections as I could to arrange invitations to take him to places where I could show him off as a boyfriend. Several of these places and occasions were black tie events, and the first couple of times we went together, I wore a tuxedo I had owned since college and had bought second-hand when I sang in the glee club. There was a time, too, when he outgrew his own tuxedo and I took to wearing that one while he opted to dress in a more comfortable-fitting all-black suit, shirt, and tie. I never returned the tuxedo to him because I always hoped that there would be another place we could go together, but he did return to me, a year after we had broken up, some clothes that I had left behind at the summer house. He had decided to sell the house because he did not wish to go there alone anymore. In the bag he handed me were jeans I had left behind at that house that no longer fit my waist because I had fallen into a depression of eating and drinking too much. A few of the T-shirts still fit and they felt, when I put them on for the first time after an absence of months, like an old friend who had called on the phone and wanted to make sure I was doing all right.

Not long ago I lost the baseball cap he had given to me when he went on a trip to Palm Springs. It was a brown khaki color with pale green lettering and a darker green palm tree between the words. The day I lost the cap I was shopping for winter coats. I had put it on when I left the house because it looked like it would rain and had taken it off to look at myself in the mirror when I tried on a coat in a store. When I got home, I realized I had left the cap behind on a display shelf. It saddened me to think that I had lost it in this way, that I had not tossed it out from anger or grief or relief but that it had simply disappeared because of my careless oversight. Sometimes when I wear my new coat I think about the missing hat. It was a good hat. And, at the time I wore it, it fit me well.

Jameson Currier is the author of eleven works of fiction and the recently released memoir, Until My Heart Stops. He is the editor and publisher of Chelsea Station.
Derek Coyle has published poems and reviews in the U.S., Britain and Ireland; in Irish Pages, The Texas Literary Review, Cuadrivio (Mexico), Wordlegs, The SHOp, Burning Bush 2, Glitterwolf, Skylight 47, and fathers and what needs to be said. He has been shortlisted for the Patrick Kavanagh Award (2010, 2014), the Bradshaw Prize (2011), and in 2012 he was a chosen poet for the Poetry Ireland ‘Introductions Series.’ In 2013 he was placed second in the Bradshaw Prize. He currently lives in Carlow, Ireland, and he is a member of the Carlow Writers’ Co-Operative.
The Boxers

I come across them still.
Like when I opened the drawer
and saw them first thing this morning.

I had noticed how yours, loose
cotton shorts, kept getting caught
as you struggled to pull on your jeans.

The next Saturday we were out shopping
I picked a pack of four: lycra, tight-hugging—in deep purple, pink, lime green, blue.

You opened the pack at home,
spread them on the bed, a tapestry,
and asked me to pick my favourite.

I chose the lime green. I wear them,
a token of you, and like radium,
how it draws light from inside dark things,
they shine, phosphorescent in your absence.

—Derek Coyle
Jameson Currier's *Based on a True Story* is a compelling new novel that retells an actual horrific crime that never should have happened. Told in the narrative First Person, the book explores how a quartet of gay men interact with each other over a Thanksgiving dinner when various connections to a murder are revealed. Going beyond the actual crime itself, the book explores the relationships we have (both currently and with our pasts) with each other, our significant others, and ourselves.

Tom left his Southern roots long ago for the much less restrictive Manhattan collegiate lifestyle. It is there that he Comes Out and establishes an eclectic line of friends and lovers, including two men named Neal (friend), and Scott (a lover that quickly became a close friend). Years after college, Tom publishes a book of eulogies from the many friends that have died of AIDS, and after feeling oppressed from their loss and the struggle to write anything else, decides to move to Asheville, North Carolina where he eventually meets Harley. Harley is a blue collar, slightly older, burly man that works for a tow-company. After a year and a half of dating Harley moves into Tom's A-frame cabin where they are about to host Thanksgiving dinner for Scott and his new partner, Aiden.

Both Scott and Aiden were Southern raised but have moved out to Los Angeles for different reasons; Scott wants to leave New York and start new, and Aiden to avoid the Southern oppression of gay life. They have traveled to Atlanta to spend the holiday with Aiden's sister and her family. A tragic event occurred involving Aiden's nephew Perry, and the tensions of the tragedy’s settled heaviness causes Scott and Aiden to drive up to Asheville in the hopes of having a less traumatic holiday. Aiden, the youngest of the forty-something men, is the only one that is unknown to either of the hosts. While the tragedy of Aiden's family is known among the hosting couple, it is only after Aiden sees a picture from Tom's past that his previous connection to the culprit is revealed. What follows is the unfolding of the tragic events involving obsession, sexual stalking, and the inevitable path that culminated in a preventable murder.
Based on a True Story is more than a retelling of a senseless act. It explores how we relate to one another in both love and friendship. The book shows that loss can materialize in many different forms, and that the pain lingers on rippling outward, affecting the lives of others for years to come. It explores not only how the individuals deal with tragedy, especially that with a homosexual basis, but also how the community does as well in both positive and negative ways.

Jameson Currier is not a stranger to adapting True Crime circumstances to fiction while keeping the accuracy of the original case. By changing names and incidental details, Currier created an exciting and gripping account of the events surrounding Mathew Shepherd's murder in his previous novel, A Gathering Storm. In Based on a True Story Currier demonstrates his style of, once again, recreating the situations of another horrific crime of homosexual brutality. Although the longer sentences of First Person narration can be daunting to some, the book easily engages the reader bringing them into the scene as a silent observer to the unfolding of events. Despite its practically being a novella, consisting of only 153 pages, it holds the punch of a more extended account without bogging the reader down with needless details. Currier expertly and carefully explores the details of the senseless and horrific murder that is Based on a True Story.

Eric Andrews-Katz (WriteOn530@gmail.com) lives in Seattle with his husband Alan. His first story “Mr. Grimm’s Faery Tale”—a 2008 Spectrum Short Fiction Award nominee—was published in So Fey: Queer Fairy Fiction. Other works have appeared in: The Best Date Ever, Charmed Lives: Gay Spirit in Storytelling, Gay City Vols: 2, 3 & 4 (co-editor of Vol 4), The Advocate, Chelsea Station, and as a contributing writer for the Seattle Gay News. Eric is also the author of the novels The Jesus Injection (the first Agent Buck 98 adventure) and its sequel Balls & Chain.
**Desire, Lust, Passion Sex**

stories by

Jameson Currier

“Desire, Lust, Passion, Sex surpasses any expectations ten-fold. The characters speak with wisdom and understanding. Jameson Currier gives us people who are starving for attention and have an insatiable appetite for human contact. Readers will not only sympathize with his creations, but will imagine themselves there as well, among the wreckage.”


“Currier’s stories are all about sex and love and how they occasionally overlap; he writes eloquently and elegantly about the continuum of gay male sexuality, from the tickle of desire to the pull of lust to the power of passion to the satisfaction—though not always—of sex.”

—Richard Labonté, Books to Watch Out For

“Linking wit, heady sex, longing, and the agony of a hollow love life, Currier beautifully romanticizes the hope and the hunt for love, the rarest flower. At times this journey to find Mr. Right is agonizing, sometimes sad, and sometimes erotically titillating. But every scene is written with such beauty and poetic grace, it becomes an easy voyage to embrace, even though at times all the misfires and near-misses cut like a knife.”

—Jim Piechota, Bay Area Reporter

“Currier’s masterful command of language is demonstrated throughout the novel. His words are rich with the beauty of humanity, fully capturing the essence of the fragility of the hopeful heart.”

—David-Matthew Barnes, Lambda Literary

**What Comes Around**

a novel by

Jameson Currier

978-1-937627-05-8

$16

Also available in digital editions

www.chelseastationeditions.com
“Jameson Currier’s fifth novel, *The Forever Marathon*, is a compelling, brutally honest examination of two days in the life of a long term relationship between two men, who seem to have stayed together more out of habit than their desire for each other.”
—Christopher Verleger, *Edge*

What would you do if you realized you’d spent half your life with the same man and you weren’t sure if you loved him any longer? Enter Adam and Jesse, both 49. I found myself trying to predict the outcome throughout the book. The ending is honest and true to the characters, something that is not always the case in happily ever-after land.”
—Scott A. Drake, *Philadelphia Gay News*

“Currier has accomplished something truly remarkable: He has presented two highly unlikeable, self-absorbed, clichéd characters, and woven them into an interesting story that keeps the reader turning pages. This is a funny, exasperating, touching read.”
—Alan Chin, *Examiner.com*

“The opposite of love is not hate but rather indifference. Thanks to the talent of Jameson Currier, readers are never at risk for feeling indifferent to the couple at the heart of his *The Forever Marathon*. Adoration mingled with aversion at this pair’s antics ensures every page will be read with enthusiasm. We should all be grateful that Currier has not shied away from presenting an honest depiction of gay men in their late forties.”
—Steve Berman, editor of the *Best Gay Stories* annual series
It is the summer of 1988, and Seth Davis, a gay journalist for New Day magazine living in Manhattan, is at a crossroads in his life. His relationship with Martin Spencer, his live-in boyfriend of seven years, has lost its spark; moreover, he has begun experiencing intense dreams involving otherworldly entities. As a way to escape the stagnation of his life—and the oppressive Manhattan heat—Seth accepts an invitation from his friend Richard Abbey to visit for a Fourth of July party in Hope Springs, Pennsylvania. Over the long holiday weekend, Seth meets (among others) Beth and Roger Prince, a couple whose marriage is about to end; Raven Grimmsley, a hereditary witch and leader of the local coven; and a nameless ghost, one of the walking dead.

After being spooked and subsequently hightailing it back to Manhattan, Seth remains unable to explain away the haunting as a hallucination induced by drugs and/or alcohol. Seth’s physical journey to Hope Springs thus begins for him a similar spiritual journey. Raised within Reformed Judaism by his adopted parents, Seth had rejected all formal religion as an adult; and while outwardly skeptical of his boyfriend’s interest in the occult and the New Age, Seth secretly longs for it to be true. So Seth’s initial journey to Hope Springs—“the most haunted place in America”—leads to repeat visits, where he gradually learns not only the history of Hope Springs, but eventually his own personal history, both of his current life, and of lives formerly lived. Seth also becomes entangled in the present history of Hope Springs, through the agency of his friend Richard, who spearheads a local group of environmentalists (“Damn the Dam”) against the damming of the Orenda river, and the building of a nuclear power plant in the Orenda river valley. Opposing Richard is Raven Grimmsley: in desperate financial straits, she hopes to recoup her lost fortune by leasing her family property to the power plant.

Weinberg, unlike many writers who include pagan characters, dares to portray them in a negative light. Many modern writers tend to fall into a strict (but simplistic) dichotomy of Christianity::evil and pagan::good; Weinberg, on the other hand, writes about pagans who can
just as easily succumb to temptation as their Christian counterparts. The members of Raven’s coven are motivated by a variety of reasons, including love for the Earth and self-development, but are just as susceptible to the lust of power and desire for money as any non-pagan. Raven herself employs a number of different arguments to rationalize her increasingly reprehensible actions, in an effort to maintain control of her coven, and to achieve financial security.

Ultimately, however, the novel is about redemption. Once Seth learns the identity of the nameless ghost who haunted his first visit to Hope Springs (and, more importantly, his connection to the ghost, both in this life and in a former lifetime), he realizes that it falls to him to lay it to rest. Seth’s quest to lead this ghost to the Light also leads to his accepting his own heritage in this life, as well as the knowledge and wisdom gained from former lives, a journey that leads Seth to finding his own true religion.

Keith Glaeske is a medievalist and collector of speculative fiction currently living in Washington, DC. His articles about medieval literature have been published in Medieval Perspectives, Traditio, and Ériu. He regularly reviews books for Chelsea Station, Lambda Literary Review, and other sites.
The Weight of My Past
Essay by Gregory Messina

It never occurred to me when I was younger that I would still feel the weight of my thirteen-year-old self. Although evidence suggests that I’m all grown up, my brain sometimes thinks I’m still the picked-on pudgy teenager I so desperately wanted to leave behind. I know that I am not alone, that many of us who were teased for whatever way we or our bodies were different are still haunted by our younger, insecure selves.

It all began with my cheeks. In third grade, Heather Weiss dubbed me “chubby cheeks,” lazily opting for the most obvious of nicknames. At the time, I had cast her in a play I was multi-hyphenating. Having gone one “chubby cheek” too far, I replaced her with another up-and-coming nine-year-old starlet who wisely chose to ignore my face.
As I entered adolescence, my addiction to fried chicken and bologna helped my belly to overcome my cheeks. In case I couldn’t tell, my doctor wrote “overweight” on my chart and encircled the word with great vigor, several times.

If it had only been my doctor who pointed out my weight problem perhaps I would’ve grown up unscathed. But no, I was in junior high at the time. I was bestowed with two nicknames as if one was not sufficiently damaging: Pillsbury Doughboy (Pills, for short) and Stay Puft, the famed marshmallow man from *Ghostbusters*. People would either try to poke my belly with their finger or they would ask me for marshmallows. I didn’t even like marshmallows.

Sticks and stones would have been preferable at the time. Physical scars, I’ve since learned, are easier to get over than emotional ones. I would have liked to ignore the teasing but I was a teenager. An onslaught of very special episodes of (insert name of ’80s sitcom here) told me not to care what other people thought but that was easier said than done. Duh. I wish I could boast about the zingy comebacks I came up with making fun of their unibrows or oversized zits but I didn’t want to be mean.

I was never OK with being fat and did whatever I could do keep my chubbiness under the radar. But wearing baggy clothes only made it worse. Wearing a T-shirt while swimming only made it worse. You can’t hide being fat; you can only suck in your stomach, and only for so long.

My diet merely consisted of switching to Diet Coke. I was an impossibly picky eater; I refused most of what my mother cooked for the rest of the family, so I had microwavable fried chicken wings and chocolate milk for dinner at least three nights a week. Clearly being called names didn’t motivate me enough to improve my eating habits.

As a late teen, the fat went away naturally. Even with my reputation as a staunch fried enthusiast intact, my high school and college years were considerably less scarring.

And then I moved to New York City.

My first night there, my friend Michelle and I went to a restaurant in Chelsea where all the customers were muscular gay men wearing tight T-shirts that apparently only came in black or white. Michelle was the odd one out for being the only woman. I was the odd one out for being the only man without a six-pack.

I could not know it that night, but this set the stage for my next several years in New York City and then Los Angeles. Of course, I chose the two most ego crushing cities for any insecure gay man. I inevitably felt like the odd one out because everywhere I turned were very handsome faces often attached to very good bodies. The teenage-teasing I was faced with is the leading cause of the chronic discomfort I had and continue to have with my body. Ever since then, no matter what shape my body has taken, I have always felt a little fat. If someone had a choice between me or the worked-out dude to my left, I could not compete.

While at a West Hollywood bar one night, I overheard:

**Question:** “Is he good looking?”

**Answer:** “He doesn’t have a good body.”

Not the question. While this conversation was not about me, it easily could have been. People like that can make the insecurely out of shape feel oh so small. When I went out, I just wanted to drink and flirt, I did not want to feel like I was back in 1987. This person was not trying to be
mean, he was simply foolish for thinking that only people with good bodies can be attractive. I knew there were others just like him.

I started to become hyper-aware of how men were portrayed so perfectly fit on the cover of magazines, in advertisements, and on screens both big and small—something I hadn’t noticed growing up. Matinée idols Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt were often the sexiest men alive according to well-documented scientific research and, well, I sure didn’t look like them. I wondered if I was suddenly feeling how decades of women must’ve felt when constantly faced with cover girls or how they felt when models all of a sudden became super. My insecurity became magnified. I suspected that I would never look as good as Marky Mark did in a pair of tighty whites. Sigh.

I know that I wasn’t really fat but I had gained enough weight to feel like the Pills I used to be. I still had horrible eating habits and no strength to change them, nor the know-how. I never learned how to cook besides boiling noodles, making PB&J sandwiches, and operating a microwave oven. I also preferred spending the little money I earned on apple martinis rather than actual apples. If only I could have lost weight as effortlessly as I lost my hair.

I joined a gym but that ended up being a preventative measure from gaining even more weight rather than actually losing any. I didn’t know what I was doing and couldn’t afford a personal trainer. I would run on the treadmill or ride the stationary bike, and then take out KFC or Taco Bell on the way home.

The amount of weight I actually gained in my twenties didn’t become evident until I moved to Paris and surprisingly lost twenty pounds without dieting or exercise. As out of shape as I always felt, I seriously didn’t know I had twenty pounds to lose. Smaller portion sizes played a big role, as did living with my polar opposite, a vegetarian. Before I met Luc, vegetables were just one part of an entire food group I ignored altogether.

While I have never been on an official diet here, my eating habits have drastically evolved for the better. Luc makes sure that I eat healthy foods, not just those that are fried and greasy. Au revoir four piece combo chicken meal with fries and a biscuit. Also, I have always eaten whatever is on my plate. In the U.S., where portion sizes are ridiculously Thanksgiving-sized no matter what day of the year, it is easy to finish a meal feeling bloated. In France, I can clean my entire plate and be comfortably satisfied. My “diet” is more of a natural one rather than a strict, regimented one. And my mother would be amazed at what I happily eat now.

Nevertheless, proud to be twenty pounds lighter, I still felt my gut, love handles, and inner-Pills holding on for dear life. This was confirmed by one of Luc’s friends who told him in confidence (oops) that I was a “faux-maigre;” I was merely pretending to be skinny. I hate to be faux-anything so I joined one of the few gyms here too and declared 2008 to be the “Year of the Abs.” Not so much.

After years of more biking in place, my faux-gut continued to prove quite stubborn. I finally invested in a personal trainer to help silence the taunts from my past once and for all. Thanks to his guidance, I am now almost close to calling myself thin though I would never dare write that out loud.

Mine, however, is not the happy ending of an Afterschool Special. I did not learn that valuable lesson, the one about not caring what other people think about me. I did not accept my out-of-shape body and hold my head high. No, I am constantly obsessed about losing weight. This has
embarrassed me for years, knowing that I should accept my body for what it is. But then I was reminded everywhere and every day that I can’t possibly be alone.

Empires have been built feeding on people’s insecurities. Otherwise, going to a meeting to be “weighed in” would never happen, carbs would be eaten unabashedly, nobody would give a merde why French women don’t get fat and there would be a lot of out-of-work personal trainers, nutritionists, fro yo servers, and liposuction technicians. I am not weak; I am human.

In “researching” this essay, I have been reassured by other adults who were once picked on overweight teens that they too still feel fat. I have also been told by other friends who were picked on for other reasons, some for being too skinny (what the what?), that they haven’t been able to completely get over the name-calling they were subjected to either. While it is comforting to know that I am not alone, it amazes me that we are still influenced by that teasing and in my case, nearly thirty years later. How could the damage done back then be so irreparable?

These days, I get off on telling people about my earlier nicknames because they can’t seem to imagine that I was ever overweight. Whenever someone expresses disbelief about my earlier chubbiness, a little part of the Pills in me dies. I take great satisfaction in that. And then I consider treating myself to something supersized at McDonald’s.

__________

Gregory Messina graduated from Washington University in St. Louis in 1996. He first worked at a New York-based literary agency where he sold the film rights for the agency’s children’s and YA books. After spending five years in Los Angeles where he worked in film and TV, Gregory moved to Paris in 2004 where he still resides. He worked for French publishing companies for nearly ten years before opening his own literary agency in March 2015.
“William Sterling Walker is a wonderful writer, fluent, warm, intelligent, and real. His stories about gay life in New Orleans are firmly rooted in place, and all his characters, gay and straight, are observed with a wise heart and a deep soul.”
—Christopher Bram, author of Gods and Monsters and Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America

“Desire is a sensuous, nostalgic, and evocative collection of stories set in sultry New Orleans before that dreamy dream got washed away.”
—Valerie Martin, winner of the Orange Prize for Property

“These are stories that ask to be lived in—gorgeous, moody, sophisticated—not unlike the vividly conjured New Orleans that William Sterling Walker’s haunted characters inhabit, flee from, inevitably return to. Walker is a brilliant guide through the labyrinth of this city and these seething lives, fluent in the mutually reinforcing tropes of desire and regret.”
—Paul Russell, author of The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov

“This beautiful collection is not so much a set of stories as an intricate song cycle, one that arranges and rearranges recurrent fragments of memory and sensation—light, fragrance, and music—like the tesserae of a mosaic, the shifting patterns converging into a haunting panorama of the life of our ecstatic, fated generation of gay men.”
—Mark Merlis, author of American Studies and An Arrow’s Flight

“Desire is dreamy and affecting, stories of a New Orleans that was gone before Katrina ever got there. It’s been a while since I’ve read a collection so well written, so intricately composed, with such beautiful and evocative descriptions of a time and a place.”
—Caroline Fraser, author of God’s Perfect Child and Rewilding the World: Dispatches from the Conservation Revolution

“William Sterling Walker’s Desire feels to me like a welcome heir to Ethan Mordden’s classic Buddies—picking up perhaps where he left off and setting us down amid the lives, loves, and sexual adventures of a community of gay men in New Orleans. These linked stories are alternately poignant and seductive, and the structure is elegant and deceptively casual—they build in force until you feel like they belong to you, or you to them.”
—Alexander Chee, author of Edinburgh

“This compilation of short stories stands to prove that gay men are not always the exuberant, funloving queens portrayed on TV. Each story looks at how New Orleans has played into the characters’ identities, how it has sucked them in.”
—Katie Abate, Edge

“Desire is a guilty pleasure of a read, conversational and conspiratorial. It’s almost as if these people are welcoming you into their private chats, dishing out the latest neighborhood gossip about who picked up whom, whose ex is now someone else’s current.”
—Sandy Leonard, Lambda Literary

“Equal doses of wit, longing, poignancy, hope, seduction and loss, all woven together by this talented author. I give it a full five stars out of five.”
—Bob Lind, Echo Magazine

Desire: Tales of New Orleans
by William Sterling Walker
978-1-937627-02-7
$18
Also available in digital editions
Ali’s Knife

Kevin Alan Wells

The sound of Ali’s knife made Daniel feel safe. *Chop—chop—chop—chop. Chop—chop—chop—chop.* He had tried to write a poem in its accentual meter to give to Ali as a present. But on paper the sound felt like machine gun blasts. Hardly safe. No, it only felt right to Daniel when Ali was leaning forward in his apron, making that sound next to him in the kitchen.

“It’s a shame Monika won’t be here,” Daniel said as he pulled apart a dozen white roses for the centerpiece bouquet. “She loves your soup.”

*Chop—chop—chop—chop. Chop—chop—chop—chop.*

“When are we going to visit her?” Daniel asked. He laid the roses on the kitchen island next to several pink carnations. “It’s been almost a week since her surgery, you know.”
Ali stopped and stood up straight. “Yeah, about a week.” He brushed a strand of hair away from his forehead with the sleeve of his faded checkered shirt. “Can you tell me how the broth’s coming along?”

Daniel looked over his shoulder at the pot on the stove as the rhythm of cutting continued. “Bubbles,” he said.

“Honey bubbles or bubblegum bubbles?” Ali asked.


“No, that’s no good. We’ve got to keep the boil low. Could you turn it down?”

Daniel responded with a long slide across the kitchen floor in his socks. He turned the knob on the stove until the flame under the soup pot looked like a size Ali would appreciate. “Smells damn good—hey, look!” He slid back to Ali to show how his glasses had fogged in the rising steam. “Isn’t that funny?”

Ali smiled faintly. “I told you Lisa texted me, didn’t I? She and Joe are coming.”

“That’s eight for dinner then,” Daniel said. He picked up a cluster of calamintha from the kitchen island and started pulling it apart. “You didn’t really answer me about visiting Monika, you know.”


“What, Wednesday? No, that wasn’t your answer,” Daniel said, and he flicked a stalk through the air. “I deleted it the moment you said it.”

“Rather a habit with you, isn’t that?” Ali swiped the cut carrots into a bowl.

Daniel inched closer and nudged him with his hip. “I’m trying to be kind to you, Ali. Are you trying to be kind to me?”

Ali waved his knifeless hand in dismissal. “I told you, my opinion about Monika isn’t changing. The gastric bypass was bad enough. This body lift business is the end. Mail some plastic doll to keep her company; they have more in common now.”

“Ali! She’s just gone through major surgery.”

“Elective surgery,” he said with a sneer.

“She’s alone. She needs support.”

Ali shook his gray head as he diced a pepper. “That kid does not need anyone to support her mistakes. What she needs is to understand that self-actualization starts with self-acceptance.”

Daniel was pruning the stem of a sunflower far more than it needed. “She’s our friend,” he said tensely. “We have a commitment to her.”

“We have greater commitment elsewhere,” Ali replied.

Daniel groaned. “Your false dilemma again. You—”

“No,” Ali said sharply, pointing his knife like a finger. “We’ve rallied our whole lives on the idea that we can’t change who we are.” He held down an onion and chopped it in half. “That we shouldn’t change who we are. How can she ask for society’s acceptance when she can’t even accept herself?”
“All that weight,” Daniel said ponderously. “It wasn’t healthy.”
“Mutilating herself, tearing apart her natural existence—that was unhealthy.”
“But the weight wasn’t her, Ali. Obesity is a disease.”
Ali snorted. “They used to call us a disease.”
“Some still do,” Daniel said, nodding. “Which is more reason for us to stay together, to help each other.”


Daniel worked beside him quietly for several minutes with his eyebrows scrunched in affliction. He knotted some green twine around the new bouquet and held it out. “Well,” he tried, “how do you like our centerpiece?”

Ali grunted.
“You didn’t stop. You didn’t even look.”
“I did, I looked. Nice flowers.”
“Why are you being this way? I just hate this side of you. It makes me sad.” And he placed a hand on Ali’s faded sleeve.

At this, Ali did stop. He stood up straight again and looked at the bouquet, at the hand touching him, at the face so close to him, and he spoke. “Don’t be such a faggot, Daniel. Just check the broth again, will you please?”

Shocked and clutching the bouquet, Daniel moved away from Ali, toward the stove as he had asked.


Daniel closed his eyes and listened to the blasts. “Oh, look,” he said after a moment, his voice shaking. “Another faggot you can hate.”

A surge of bubbling noise spun Ali around. Sticking upside down out of the soup, a bundle of green stems bobbed in the broth that was boiling over the sides of the copper pot. A hiss of sizzles filled the kitchen from the flames of the burner that had been turned to high. “My soup!” Ali screamed. “You ruined my soup!”

“Our soup!” Daniel shouted back, walking swiftly from the kitchen.

Kevin Alan Wells is a doctoral student of the humanities at The University of Texas at Dallas, where he also teaches undergraduate composition. His other publications can be read in Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Persuasions On-Line, and Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine.
Reggie Lauderdale suffers from a crisis of faith. His cousin, Elmer Mott, dreams of becoming their hometown mayor. Both boys are stuck in suburbia trying to be adults... but they aren't sure how to be themselves yet. When a twist of fate sends them fleeing in a stolen limousine, the cousins escape to Florida where they meet a retired televangelist, who inspires them on a path of glitzy sermons and late night parties. But are the celebrations sincere or deceptive? And who is keeping tabs? Who is watching?

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—Michael Carroll, author of *Little Reef and Other Stories*
RECIPES for SUCCESS

Michael Graves

RECIPe #1

You should be good. I do not mean good at your job. I do not mean good-looking. You must be good to the people all around you.


My suggestions could go on for countless cards. But you understand. Just BE GOOD.

Goodness always multiplies. It will lighten us all.

So, just try, okay?
At any time, something amazing could happen. One never knows.

You may win the lottery or meet your lifetime love or become famous. You could save another from drowning. You could awake with the ability to soar through the sky. You could receive a gift from a close friend.

There are countless possibilities. Simply consider them all. Maybe, if we believe these things might occur, well, maybe they will.

Please...always believe in that word.

Maybe.

Maybe.

MAYBE.

Every moment sails by and, I’m guessing, you don’t know this until your old and have to take many pills. But it’s true. Everything happens so quickly. And then it’s gone.

Just listen. And talk. And look at the people and places that are alive all around you. Truly try to live...in the moment. It’s a full-time task.

Just try not to miss out on too much of your life.

Soon, moments will be memories.

You sleep. And, therefore, you dream. Maybe you don’t remember all your dreams, but they do happen.

You also dream when not in slumber. You dream of becoming this. You dream of becoming that. You dream of doing such and such or so and so.

When you have dreams awake, it’s easy to discard them.

But don’t reject your visions.

They will save you, as they have saved me.

Michael Graves is the author of Dirty One. This debut collection of stories was a Lambda Literary Award finalist and an American Library Association honoree. His work has appeared in numerous literary journals, including Post Road, Blithe House Quarterly, Chelsea Station, and With: New Gay Fiction. His novel Parade was recently published by Chelsea Station Editions. Visit Michael at: http://www.michaelgravesauthor.com/and www.facebook.com/michaelgravesauthor.
Set in the 1980’s, Dirty One follows a pack of adolescent characters who live in the acid-drenched, suburban town known as Leominster, Massachusetts—the plastics capital of America, as well as the birthplace of Johnny Appleseed.

Praise for Dirty One

“The young adults that populate Graves’ fiction are skewed, skittering through their adolescence with a drug- and demon-fueled intensity that leaves the reader breathless and aching to sit down with these poor kids to let them know that things do, indeed, get better. Still, the kids are only following the examples of their even more fucked up parents, most of whom have no business having kids in the first place. But the drama… The drama is delicious and makes for some of the finest reading I’ve had in months. Graves is one of the most original young voices writing for our community today—so pick up a copy of Dirty One and you can tell your friends that you were a fan from the beginning.”
—Jerry Wheeler, Out in Print

“As debuts go, they don’t get much better than this. Graves, a child of the ‘80s, draws diligently on the banal pop culture totems of his adolescence—cassette tapes, pastel recliners, roller rinks, Walkmans, Mario Lopez in Tiger Beat. His characters, however, are far from banal. They are antsy, angsty kids, some in their teens, some younger, consumed by jarring desires they can’t resist but don’t quite comprehend, anxious to shed their everyday skins but with barely any sense of the world beyond their suburban existence. And, boy, do they transgress. These stories brand Graves as a next-generation master of prose that is at once remorseless and refreshing.”
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—Kirkus Review

“Gifted novelist Jameson Currier, has an incredible knack for portraying gay men as complex and flawed yet like-minded, mostly likable and relatable individuals. His latest, Based on a True Story, presents an intriguing, introspective examination of two gay couples who spend Thanksgiving weekend together in a rustic mountain cabin.”
—Christopher Verleger, Edge
“Are we expecting the Royal Family?” Aiden asked.

While Harley started the fire in the hearth of the Great Room, Aiden and Scott had followed me into the kitchen, Zero close behind them, delighted by the change in rooms and hoping it meant food for him. Scott had the good sense of staying out of the way, stooping down to his haunches and petting Inky, but Zero stayed eagerly at my side, convinced that I would feed him something if he just looked up at me with his sad eyes and begged. Aiden, too, had decided to hover close beside me, reading my recipes which were hand-written on the back side of a stack of green-colored index cards which listed, in order of succession, the Kings and Queens of England.
“I’ve used these since college,” I answered him. “Junior Year. History of the British Empire. I can do the Plantagenets, Yorks, Tudors, and Stuarts, but the Hanovers still throw me.”

“You might have a great marketing scheme here,” Aiden said. “Learn world history while you cook.”

The first Thanksgiving dinner I cooked for friends was the year Jeff and I shared an apartment off-campus. I was not a good cook, knew nothing about cooking, really, and had already developed a reputation among my friends as a bad one from the time I had cooked frozen broccoli with a half-cup of salt for a dinner party of six. (The recipe on the back of the box had instructed to boil the broccoli shoots in a half-cup of salted water, which I had taken, literally, to mean a half-cup of salt.)

There were to be five of us that year for Thanksgiving dinner, 1975—myself, Jeff, Neal, and two girls from the University choral group who had not traveled home during the break in classes—Lee-Anne, a statuesque sorority girl, and Tracey, a short, overweight brunette who had a crush on Neal. I had called my mother to tell her I would not be coming to the house for the holiday and would be eating with my friends and in the same breath asked her for her recipes, which I wrote down on the back side of index cards I had been using to outline the royal succession to the throne of England. This was long before the Internet, of course, and I had spent close to an hour with my mother on the telephone, writing down how to wash and baste a turkey, how to prepare the stuffing, how to make a string bean casserole and a cranberry Jell-O salad, when to start making the gravy, when to heat the pie—all the things I had never paid attention to when she had done it for our family. That meal had turned out fine once Neal had decided that our oven did not cook at the temperature it read on the dial, though there had been a bit of a squabble over dessert as I recall, or, rather, a bit of a broken heart when Neal told Tracey that she had put too much sugar in the frosting of a cake she had made for the occasion and she had reacted by breaking into tears.

“No cookbook?” Aiden asked. He looked alarmed. Or mock-alarmed, as if I were the queerest gay man ever to step foot in a kitchen without a professionally-written bible of what to do. I was not about to admit to him that I was a lousy cook—that Harley generally did all of the cooking for us on the outdoor grill when the weather was fine and that my idea of a well-balanced meal was to eat out at a restaurant. Instead, I answered rather proudly, “Every year I add a little something different.”

I picked up one of the cards from the stack, flipped it over, and said, “This was ‘98, I made an apple cobbler that year for a guy I was dating—Russell—who turned out to be a bit of a rotten apple, himself—but the pie was great. And this was ‘87—the year Kyle ordered an organic turkey. Scott was there for that one. The pan had a hole in it and we had a terrible smoke problem in the apartment.”

Scott looked up from the floor and Inky and said, “Kyle was in such bad shape it didn’t bother him. The rest of us were coughing and our eyes were tearing.”

“And this year?” Aiden asked.

“A pumpkin pie.”

“A real pumpkin pie?” Aiden asked, again with his mock-alarm expression and tone of voice.

“Of course not,” Harley answered as he walked into the kitchen and rinsed his hands at the sink. Zero quickly abandoned me knowing for certain he could expect a treat from Harley. “It’s from a can.”
Aiden turned to me and asked, with a disappointing tilt of his head, “And the crust?”

“Store bought,” Harley answered again for me. “But he bakes it up all just fine.” He reached into a box of dog treats and held one up in front of Zero’s eyes. The dog leapt up and snatched it from Harley’s fingers, did a little circle on the linoleum, his paws clacking-clacking-clacking till he settled into a corner and began gnawing at his bone.

I was eager to get the topic of discussion away from my cooking skills, worried that sooner or later Scott might dredge up a memory of burned waffles from the summer house in the Hamptons, and I asked Aiden if he was ready for a cocktail yet.

“On an empty stomach?” he answered. “I shouldn’t!”

“You should,” Scott said. “It’ll calm you down. And I’ll join you.”

While the three of them hustled about the kitchen—Harley pulling down glasses and ice cubes and showing them our supply of liquor and mixers, I threw away the cans of cream of mushroom soup that I had used to make the green bean casserole and tried not to feel like too much of a cooking fraud. I’d never admit that I was a sentimental man, because I wear my sentiment like a protective apron, and these note cards represented close to thirty years of my holiday memories that I had religiously refused to let go of—the stain on the recipe for gravy was from the year I’d cooked for my cousin and her boyfriend the first year I landed in Manhattan; the burned edges on the card for the recipe for stuffing was from the year I cooked the organic turkey for Kyle and, while rescuing the burning turkey pan, the card slipped too close to the gas flame.

Kyle had always gathered his friends for a home-cooked meal at his apartment during the holidays and it was my intention to keep up the tradition the year he was too ill to do it himself. I had met Kyle at a holiday party on the Upper West Side, one of those friendly but over-crowded gatherings that take place in apartments on West 77th Street on the Upper West Side on Thanksgiving eve, when the giant cartoon-character balloons are blown up along the block for the next day’s parade. Snoopy, Kermit, Popeye, and Mighty Mouse were lumpy rolls of rubber when I followed Scott into a doorman building and took the elevator to the 17th floor. Kyle, who was a friend of the actor who had lucked into subletting the apartment, was standing near the windows looking down at the saggy bloat of Popeye’s forearm and calculating the net worth of the view when Scott introduced us to each other.

Kyle had long, limp, reddish-brown hair, a high forehead, and small dark brown eyes brightened by the glint of the bookish, silver wire-rimmed eyeglasses he wore. His face was too strong and serious to allow his impish sexuality to become annoying, but because he was always meticulously groomed—hair evenly cut around his small ears, his jaw closely shaved and with a whiff of aftershave at his collar—it was difficult not to fantasize undressing him.

I had gone home with Kyle that night to his apartment in Hell’s Kitchen and had stayed until the next morning, when he awoke cranky and hung-over and hurriedly tried to get rid of me before he began cooking his holiday meal for “eight or nine of his dearest and closest friends,” one of whom was Scott and to whom I protested to later that night on the phone when he had returned to his apartment stuffed and tired from Kyle’s elaborate holiday feast. “He didn’t even have the decency to ask me if I had any plans of my own,” I said, though I was not dismayed that I had been overlooked and ignored—at that moment I was simply a one-night trick for Kyle and I had certainly
treated some of my other sexual partners worse than Kyle had treated me. And the truth was I did have plans of my own in place, though I was also somewhat miffed that Scott had chosen to dine with Kyle and his fabulous crowd of in-the-know urbanites instead of with me and my cousin from Westchester and her new boyfriend, though I couldn’t blame him for his choice. (Ours was an awkward dinner, made even more uncomfortable by my cousin’s boyfriend’s visible disdain of an openly gay man.)

Kyle and I dated each other a few more times that holiday season, but I found him too passive in bed and too pretentious out of it to want to be boyfriends with him. And, since we had so many good friends in common (not to mention several of the same ex-boyfriends), we soon became closer friends than significant others, brothers, really, instead of lovers, more able to tolerate each other’s faults. Scott and Kyle had also cultivated a gently antagonist relationship which I enjoyed being an audience for, since it was often carried out as if they were characters in a play. Scott was traditional, structural, and habitual; he grew up with old Southern money, debutantes in white gloves, and mint juleps on the plantation porch, that sort of thing, and his opinion was often based on etiquette and education, both social and literary. Kyle, however, was faddish and trendy—always on the run to visit whatever gallery or restaurant had been anointed as au courant and en vogue. They often passionately disagreed on the arts, particularly on new wave films or avant-garde plays that Scott had negatively reviewed—“I’m sorry, Kyle, but where was the plot?” Scott would argue, or “It was a lovely melody, yes, but the dialogue was out of a soap opera.” Kyle, in turn, would huffily respond, “Don’t be so small, Scott, learn to think outside of the box!” or “You’re condemning it simply because it’s different, not because you don’t want to admit it was good.”

And, as fate would have it, Kyle and Scott became my surrogate family in the city, and for several years later, when I had been invited to attend Kyle's holiday soirees (where I had also helped him cook), I would often kid him that he had thrown me out in favor of his more wealthy and snobbish friends, all of whom seemed to change or just simply disappear from year to year. Kyle had many famous friends, in fact, including several Broadway actors (one of whom was a Tony winner), a Soho gallery owner, and several writers at work on various new projects—all of whom I would never see or hear about during the year until these annual holiday gatherings. Kyle also liked to be pretentious with his menu, using olive oil imported from Greece, for instance, because it had a more fruity taste, or buying imported black Himalayan truffles because they were less pungent than the European brands, but by then I had grown to consider his pretentiousness more ironic than serious, a faux-pretentious, as it were, particularly when he would describe the hors d’oeuvres of shrimp wrapped in seaweed as Asian fusion or explain that the chunky tomato pasta sauce was prepared the way it was in a particular hill town in Campania.

But Kyle was a much better host than I ever learned how to be; he didn’t fret or hover as I did; he laughed and nodded, placed his hand on shoulders, interrupted conversations to refresh drinks. And he was much more hip and cutting edge than I ever cared to be, always quick to ask his guests, “What’s been going on with you?” or “Kindly give me all of the details, please, you know how interested I am in all of this.” I attributed his sense of ease with having been a life-long New Yorker and a product of a broken home, living in a succession of Manhattan apartments with either his mother or father.
and learning to impress their parade of suitors with his charm and quick wit.

All of his famous and long-standing family friends evaporated when he became ill, of course, or, rather, as he progressively deteriorated from AIDS, a secret which he kept hidden from his parents as long as he could (but which did not escape their prying eyes). Scott and I were left monitoring his doctors and medicines and disclosing the truth to anyone we could find to tell it to, both close and casual, professional or medical, especially when Kyle took a leave of absence from his job as a publicist after an extensive hospitalization for a variety of items which no doctor could seem to pinpoint the exact cause of, except from an ever-weakening immune system.

After his death, I had tried to keep up Kyle’s Thanksgiving tradition going for as long as I could, but his glittery crowd was not interested in re-asmbling for such a sure-to-be morbid gathering of my bad cooking, and as more of my own friends were lost or moved away or became involved with other partners, my Thanksgiving routine became more intimate again, usually entertaining my boyfriend-of-the-moment by candlelight and a simple meal, if he were in town and willing to be subjected to my cooking. Now, after so many years of Thanksgiving without him, my memories of Kyle seemed reduced to smells and stains on recipe cards.

“You know how to cook a pecan pie?” Scott asked. It was his turn to hover about me, drink in hand, looking at the note cards.

“I tried it one year,” I said. “Not much success.”

“What kind of Southern boy are you?” Aiden asked. They had changed places; now, Aiden was now on his knees petting Inky and looking up at me from the floor. “Don’t you know you’re supposed to doctor it up? More rum the better.”

“Or bourbon,” Scott added, close behind. “That’s how my mom always did it.”

“Touché,” Aiden said, and raised his glass in the air, his face breaking into a bright smile.

“Who’s Mitch?” Scott asked, still thumbing through my note cards. “Did I ever know a Mitch?”

“What do you mean?” I answered him, feeling the blood drain from my face. I did my best to hide my astonishment as I took the notecard from him and looked at where I had scribbled in pencil, years before, “Call Mitch.”

“He was a guy I met when I first moved to the city,” I answered apprehensively, shifting my eyes away from the card to hide my surprise of finding his name there. “I was supposed to get together with him Thanksgiving night. I guess I never erased it.”

That, of course, was the short version of my friendship with Mitch, but there was a longer and more problematic shape to it that I had never admitted to anyone. Mitch had big blue eyes, wavy black hair combed back to emphasize his widow’s peak, and a compact, lean body as suggestively obscene as a porn star, full of pulpy veins snaking across the muscles of his arms and thighs. He had nothing of Scott or Kyle’s refinement, the son of a steel worker and the last child in a family of six in northern Pennsylvania. I had met him when we were both leaving the Club Baths on First Avenue one Sunday morning in 1978 and he had asked me if I had met anyone interesting (which I hadn’t) and I asked him if he wanted to join me for breakfast at a diner (which he did). There was an intense moodiness to him, though his speech was often short, staccato phrases and rarely a complete sentence. I was fascinated with his hyper-masculinity, the black, pebbly stubble of beard to the glossy dusting of black hair.
at the back of his knuckles. I always believed that since we had met coming out of a sex club that Mitch thought me more of a hedonist and sexual athlete than I truly was, an illusion that I dishonestly tried to carry off as best I could. He had a complete lack of sexual inhibition and, along the course of our friendship, I followed him through a maze of discos and backrooms in the city, places I would have never had the courage to go on my own because I wanted to be with him, wanted him to say, “Let’s just forget about all this nonsense and go back to my apartment and do it together.” Which, of course, never happened.

In many ways, this warped mentor-protégé experimentation was an extension of the relationship I had enjoyed with Jeff only a few years before, and Mitch hungrily summoned up my passion to please a handsome partner. I would have settled for giving him a blow job just once, but he was completely indifferent to my desire for him, or, rather, he had no inclination to spoil the “special friendship” he felt that he could share with me, which in his version of the story meant that I was an asexual witness to his self-gratification. Often, after coming home from the baths or a sex club where I had gone with him and watched him disappear the moment he slammed the locker door shut, I used to dream about him fucking me and crushing me beneath the weight of his body. I soon grew tired of my voyeuristic role in his life, however, and months would pass before he would call and I would again agree to follow him out into the night.

This went on for years, of course, in its perversely passive-aggressive way, until the Thanksgiving in 1987 that Kyle was too ill to cook, when one of Mitch’s sisters left me a message inviting me to a party at his apartment that night. I understood immediately the subtext beneath the purpose of her call; Mitch must have been too bad off himself to call me. Or too embarrassed to withstand my questioning. The last time I had seen him was almost a year and half before when we had gone to a bar on Columbus Avenue together and I had noticed a rough, reddish patch of skin just to the left side of the cleft in his chin. It wasn’t until I listened to his sister’s message on my answering machine that I grasped what he had told me was an infected gash while shaving was instead a KS lesion and his health must have deteriorated in the time I had not seen him, in much the same way Kyle’s had. I could not make it to his apartment that night, and had written down “Call Mitch” to find a moment to call him from Kyle’s apartment, but with the smoking pan and the burning notecards and Kyle’s rush of diarrhea before dessert, I had completely overlooked it. When I remembered a few days later, there was no answer when I called Mitch’s apartment and, when I happened to walk by his building on 19th Street a few months after that, I noticed that his name was no longer on the door buzzer and figured he must have moved back to Pennsylvania, or worst, become another casualty of the epidemic. I remember the terror I felt as I walked away from his doorway; with the diagnosis of each friend, I felt suspect and guilty of my own health. Everything seemed less rational in those years. And part of my horror was that I had no one who knew of my friendship with Mitch—he was simply not part of my close circle of friends, nor would he have ever felt comfortable there. He belonged to those idyllic days when I had first arrived in Manhattan and the pursuit of sex could be an adventure, even though my larger quest had always been for something and someone more consistent and substantial.

Years later, both Scott and Harley must have realized the guilt of my secret while I avoided their stares in the kitchen of the
cabin; I’ve never been a man who could easily hide his emotions and I had frozen in thought looking at my years-old handwriting for some kind of clue to the man who had once wrote those words. Scott would have pressed me for more details if Harley’s instinctive protectiveness had not kicked in first. “When did the two of you last see each other?” Harley asked. He was referring to Scott, of course, not Mitch, bringing our friendship to the forefront of our conversation—and my mind.

Scott lifted his eyes away from the notecard and realized that Harley had directed the question toward him in an effort to change the subject. “Vegas, right?” Harley said, glancing at me.

“Just before the Millennium,” I answered.

“Five years ago?” Scott said, imitating Aiden’s way of displaying a mock-surprise—eyes bugged out, eyebrows lifted, lips rounded into a small, open “O.”

“Has it been that long?” I answered.

Four years before, 1999, instead of cooking and entertaining each other for the holiday, Scott and I had met up in Las Vegas for a week, at a time when we were both single and needing to get away from the complexity of our lives. We had wandered from casino to casino like stoned-out zombies, neither of us interested in the flashing-screaming-dinging slot machines, silently riding the monorails from Mandalay Bay to MGM Grand as if we were floating in a helium-filled balloon, regarding the bright, garishly decorated casino lobbies of the hotels as if they were filled with priceless items of art. We had gone to one of those early bird all-you-can-eat buffets, then saw a show—a Cirque du Soleil spectacular full of flying contortionists and inexplicable electronic sounds, then watched the dancing water fountains in front of the Bellagio Hotel and called it a night, retiring to our separate rooms and falling asleep as soon as our heads hit the pillow. It was a pleasant trip, neither of us even concerned where the nearest gay bar was located—both of us having been burned out by bad lovers that year.

While Scott continued to describe Vegas to Harley, I rinsed and shredded the lettuce at the sink and drained the excess water with a salad spinner, my own memory flowing from Vegas to Mitch to Kyle’s smoky apartment, while the others in the kitchen moved between the notecards, the dogs, and the refrigerator.

“Are you okay? Harley asked a few moments later when I had frozen into place. I had filled a ten-quart ceramic tureen in the shape of a pumpkin with the lettuce, carrots, mushrooms, and tomatoes and was not focused on what I should do next. “Do you need any help?”

I was trapped in another moment of sentiment; the pumpkin tureen had once been Kyle’s; it was something I had taken from his apartment after he had died because it was such a familiar part of his holiday gatherings when Scott and I were sorting through his possessions to toss away, give to friends, or donate to charities.

I looked at Harley, tried to find a way to describe this, then realized it was another thing I wanted to keep secret. “I’m fine,” I answered, shaking the remaining water on my hands into the sink. “I think we’re almost ready to eat.”

Jameson Currier is the author of eleven works of fiction, including the recently released novel, Based on a True Story, and a collection of intimate writings, Until My Heart Stops. He is the editor and publisher of Chelsea Station.
Until My Heart Stops
by Jameson Currier
Chelsea Station Editions
978-1937627171
430 pages, paperback, $20.00

Review by David Swatling

When Emerson first read Michel de Montaigne’s Essays (1580), arguably the earliest example of what we call memoir, he wrote: “It seemed to me as if I had myself written the book…so sincerely it spoke to my thought and experience.” I had a similar reaction upon finishing Jameson Currier’s Until My Heart Stops. Not all of it, I must admit. But enough that reading it was a very personal journey.

I should mention that I met Currier at the 2014 Saints & Sinners Literary Festival in New Orleans, and again this year when he was on a panel I moderated. In preparation I’d read his haunting novel The Gathering Storm, a Lambda Literary Award finalist. We met a couple times socially in New York City during the summer. And then I read his 1994 collection of moving short stories about AIDS, Dancing on the Moon, which I found in Boston’s Calamus Bookshop in August.

So I consider him a friend, though not close enough to know if he prefers to be called Jameson or Jim. I know he’s four years younger than me and moved to New York City a few years after I did. In the early 1980s, we both worked in theatre and had at least one mutual friend. I feel certain we might have met years ago had I not fled the city in 1985, a pivotal year for Currier as well. As I began a new life in Amsterdam, AIDS irrevocably changed Currier’s life. I was making new friends, while his friends were dying.

But this is meant to be a review, not a memoir. Unlike Montaigne’s precept that one man’s life could represent all men, Currier states in his introduction: “I write to understand my own life better and to comprehend my place in the world.” In the sixty or so personal essays that follow, written from the early 1980s to the present, he meticulously pursues his goal of self-knowledge.

Currier presents his life in chronological order, not necessarily the sequence in which they first appeared in various publications. The choice to leave each piece as originally written results in occasional repetitions, but this is a minor quibble. And though he admits to treading a fine line between fiction and non-fiction throughout his work, everything in this collection resonates with authenticity.
The sections where Currier writes about AIDS are particularly powerful and heartrending, especially those dealing with his best friend Kevin—the mutual friend I mentioned. The details of his last days represent the many more who passed during that dark period. And though by then I had left New York, parallel events would occur a decade later in Amsterdam. As I read Currier’s story, I couldn’t help but think about where I was or what I was doing at the same time.

Using diary-style entries to record the week of Gay Pride 1994, Currier is both funny and reflective, as he bounces from bar to bar, party to parade, looking for sex and substance within the celebration of Stonewall 25. There’s plenty of sex in the book, mostly in his relentless pursuit of a lasting romantic relationship. (Even Montaigne waxed eloquent about the capricious behavior of penises.) But sex is just another tile in the multifaceted mosaic Currier creates from his life, reflected in the stunning cover-art collage by Patrick Bremer.

“I am myself the matter of my book,” Montaigne wrote of his *Essays*. “You would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject.” I can imagine Currier might say something similar, but I would disagree. A wealth of wisdom about our collective past can be found within our personal stories when they are told with such humility, humor, and profound introspection.

David Swatling grew up in New York, studied theatre, and moved to Amsterdam in 1985. He produced arts & culture documentaries for Radio Netherlands Worldwide and is three-time winner of the NLGJA Excellence in Journalism Award, among other honors. His debut psychological thriller *Calvin’s Head* was a 2015 Lambda Literary Award Finalist and his follow-up *Corpus Calvin* will be released in May 2016. He writes about the arts and LGBTQ issues at davidswatling.wordpress.com.
The vast body of queer literature subsumes themes of otherness, identity, and clashes between marginalized groups and oppressive forces within society. As a subgenre of queer literature, black queer literature comixes the traits of the former with those present within African American literature: colonization, racism, and emancipation most notably. It is from these traditions that John Keene’s new book, *Counternarratives: Stories and Novellas*, emerges. *Counternarratives* draws immediate comparison to the works of Ismael Reed, Samuel R. Delany, E. L. Doctorow, and Jorge Luis Borges, writers whose dexterous prose and agile plot twisting styles rebelled against conventional prose and gave future writers *carte blanche* to play with form, style, and narrative. The chain of counternarratives contained within Keene’s rich text span the course of several centuries and locations within Afro-diaspora. The slave trade, the Civil War, and prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance—familiar sites of political and artistic investigation within African American literature—take presence within this sturdy text. From the sequence of these vantage points, Keene wrests narrative power from the grasp of patriarchal culture and tosses it into the hands of racial and sexual minorities. The painstakingly detailed works within Keene’s text, thick with centuries of historical, literary, and artistic artifacts, prompts readers to open themselves to the infinite realities thriving within counternarrative.

As a writer, Keene revels in the fertile landscape of history. Drawing upon newspaper articles, interrogations, and a host of other primary historical documents, Keene deftly merges the historical with the fictive in his works, calling into the question Western culture’s collective understanding of history and the authors of the historical narratives lauded and reproduced throughout Western culture. What Keene constructs in *Counternarratives* is a weighty, cerebral, yet thriving project of cultural reclamation, one that all groups that exist within the periphery of marginalization and beyond the rigid boundaries of expected or and accepted prose can find their mirror and gain from its reflection.

Historical retelling, the act of seizing upon common narratives and reinterpreting them through the gaze and voice of those deemed subaltern, is itself an act of queering, an act of rebellion and reclamation. This idea permeates each of the stories in *Counternarratives*, yet finds its greatest expression in “Rivers,” a story told from the first person perspective of Jim, the second half of
Mark Twain’s American literature’s iconic duo from the classic novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Older and scarred from the ravages of slavery and his eventual escape to freedom, Jim confronts an adult Huckleberry Finn in an effort to gain answers and satisfaction from the boy, now young man, who represents a system of oppression that consigned him to bondage before he gained the courage to escape. Their reunion lays bare the staggering complex of feelings and ideas associated with the primary text, the characters that inhabit it, and readers’ historical rendering of both the novel and the era from which these characters emerged.

Keene—whose previous work *Annotations* merged poetry and prose to create a work that is both meditative and illuminative—drops his readers into the middle of uncharted territory, surging readers through the sweep of Western history. Much like the characters in *Counternarratives*’ first offering, a tale of colonization and enslavement that catapults readers back to seventeenth century Brazil, this purposeful and well-rendered collection exhorts readers to empower themselves not only through the imaginative and skillfully crafted pages of its text, but through investigations of their own narratives.

Jarrett Neal is the author of *What Color Is Your Hoodie? Essays on Black Gay Identity*, recently released from Chelsea Station Editions. He earned a BA in English from Northwestern University and an MFA in Writing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in *Chelsea Station, The Gay and Lesbian Review, Requited Journal, The Good Men Project*, and other publications, including the Lambda Literary Award-nominated anthologies *For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Still Not Enough* and *Black Gay Genius: Answering Joseph Beam’s Call*. He lives in Oak Park, IL.
Review by Leo Racicot

Winner of the 2015 Sue Kaufman/PEN Prize for First Fiction, and nominated for both a Lammy and the Edmund White Fiction Award, Michael Carroll’s *Little Reef and Other Stories*, sub-themed “Gay men and the women who put up with them,” takes us to places we didn’t know we wanted to go, introduces us to people we didn’t realize we needed to meet. In doing so, he has found the moxie to shake the cobwebs out of the attic of standard issue metropolitan gay themes, carrying us gratefully away from New York and L.A. and walking us along with him into exhilarating literary territories. I don’t know if *Little Reef* is revolutionary but it feels revolutionary. Gone are the sad, mascara’ed drag queens leaning against lampposts bemoaning their fate or disguised, as Williams and Albee did in their stories and plays, as actual women.

A great alkaline humor infuses most of Carroll’s tales, and a militancy, characterized by a post-AIDS generation’s refusal to play victim or be labeled. Identity crises abound, and I like that. I like that Carroll does not confine his people to a box—labels are tossed out the window, or were never labels in the first place. His characters are flawed—the wheels fall off their wagon and yet—they keep moving. These stories are Seinfeldian in the best possible way. You scratch your head through a few pages before realizing that an epiphany has been bestowed. For nothing is about nothing and all good readers must trust where a writer means for them to go. It reminds me of the flaneur who never plans his itinerary, whose delights lie in the surprises his moseying reveals. I like the guesswork needed to puzzle out where these stories are heading—in one, a college professor’s wife, slogs her way through a stultifying existence (I have known many university wives and believe me, very few lives are as soul-killing) until she latches on to one of his students, freeing herself (or so she thinks!) from her dead-end mistakes until.....Oops! Don’t want to give it away!

In another story, a middle-aged writer with AIDS struggles to make sense of a life that is ending unfilled.

The second half of the book titled, After Memphis, presents us with one of the most richly complicated love stories of the decade, a brilliant dissection of a younger man’s devotion to an
older man, his loving mentor, and all that entails for both of them. One of the most realistic and un-sentimental depictions a marriage you are ever likely to read.

Mr. Carroll’s people (some of whom are on-the-fringe) are trying mighty hard not to be undone by their limitations and circumstances, be they social, geographical or intellectual. Blessedly, the author knows one need not be in Los Angeles or NYC to succeed, indeed, it is in how not where his characters define success that they do triumph or nearly triumph, wherever they have landed, in whatever ways they are “stuck.”

Little Reef’s stories are carved with an assured sexual and surgical emotional depth; no shallow scalpel for this skilled writer. I love the way Michael Carroll thinks and writes—there is something cheeky, even cruel in his storytelling, that brazen heartlessness that is, let’s face it, to be found at the core of many a relationship, gay or straight. His talent is lightly worn; his sentences merely needing to hum what a less confident writer would need to sing out loud. There is nothing splashy or “in your face” or “Look what I can do” dazzle about Carroll’s efforts and conceptions and yet dazzle they do. He liberally sidesteps showboating here, never attempting to out-cute his contemporaries. By doing so, these stories attain an astonishing honesty not found in many short story worlds. These are not what your gay Auntie was reading in 1963!

Carroll has a nicely open ear, too, for dialogue: the oily drawl of New Orleans Creole, the Cuttyhunk crawl of Maine townies, the slow putt-putt of Key West trawlers. His wit and observations are as sharp as cut glass decanters. You think you have been drinking water when all along you have been drinking the most deliciously wicked wine.

Mr. Carroll’s pen casts a wide reach, discovers a variety of personalities, an understanding of human behavior in all its messy, funny, topsy-turvy glory. The prose can be deceptively cunning; it sneaks up on you from behind and wraps its magic around your literary libido. He writes in a voice and style (cleverly sequential) uniquely his own. I cannot rightly think of anyone else who writes like this.

A standing ovation, then, for Michael Carroll, please, for his exceptional work. Little Reef takes LGBTQ fiction in a wonderful and needed new direction. We would be fools not to take that journey with him.

Leo Racicot is an award-winning essay-memoirist and poet. His most recent work has appeared in Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review, Windy City Times, Gastronomica, Alimentum and The London Review of Books.
“Old-school theatrical storytelling meets gay liberation history in Marans’ off-Broadway play, based with emotional veracity, campy humor and provocative sexiness on the lives of the Mattachine pioneers who founded the first gay-rights organization in pre-Stonewall America. Introductions by political activist David Mixner and actor Michael Urie (of Ugly Betty fame)—he plays fashion designer Rudi Gernreich—provide cultural and theatrical context. Not every play translates well to the printed page, but Temperamentals—code for homosexual in the 1950s, it seems—reads like a good short story.”

—Richard Labonté, Bookmarks

“Temperamental” was code for “homosexual” in the early 1950s, part of a secret language gay men used to communicate. The Temperamentals, Jon Marans’ hit off-Broadway play, tells the story of two men—the communist Harry Hay and the Viennese refugee and designer Rudi Gernreich—as they fall in love while building the Mattachine Society, the first gay rights organization in the pre-Stonewall United States. This special edition includes Marans’ script and production photos from the off-Broadway production of the play, along with a foreword by actor Michael Urie; an introduction by activist David Mixner; a look at Gernreich’s fashion career by journalist Joel Nikolaou; and an afterword on Harry Hay by journalist Michael Bronski.

“The intellectual, emotional and sexual.”
—The New York Times

www.chelseastationeditions.com
A contemporary story of betrayal and new beginnings, A Strange and Separate People by Jon Marans is an emotionally rich new play about a young Manhattan couple who find their world shaken when a gay doctor’s passion for his new religious beliefs challenges theirs and questions the meaning of love. This special edition includes Marans’ script along with a foreword by the playwright, theatrical production photos, special selected material, and afterwords by LGBT activists Jayson Littman and Chaim Levin.

“This engrossing three-character drama addresses the struggle for many to accept their homosexuality while adhering to their religious beliefs, in this case those of Orthodox Judaism… the play explores intriguing questions and yields affecting observations as it considers the courage required to make waves in any environment, from the synagogue to the New York State Legislature.”
—David Rooney, The New York Times

“A brilliant and insightful play about the intersection of God’s law and man’s love. “A Strange and Separate People” is rich in drama and Jewish tradition. The title comes from comments supposedly made by the late Queen Mother, who said she liked the Jews ‘very much, but they were a separate people and a strange people’ — perhaps in more ways than she ever expected.”
—Curt Schleier, The Forward
The holiday drinks thing at Sam’s place was meant to be low-key, but wound up feeling funereal. The others hadn’t seen Sam in months, since his stroke; and now, for the first time, they saw what I saw: he seemed elderly. A retired interior designer of some note, Sam was decades older than the rest of us, seventy-one, but socially he’d long played in our groove, as it were. In all the summers the five of us spent out in the Pines in the same rented house, with and without the not-quite-boyfriends any of us might have brought along for a weekend, Sam, always buoyant, was game with a youngishness that people often remarked upon, a quality that explained how he attracted much younger not-quite-boyfriends, and suggested how vital he must have been at their age. One of his favorite art forms was dance, so he served on the board of a hot-and-happening contemporary dance company, one of whose twenty-something performers he’d been seeing for a year
before the stroke. But now, despite his trademark handsome white crew cut and trim white beard, Sam was suddenly another person—frail, hesitant, his once icy blue eyes a little milky—and the dancer, gone.

Around Thanksgiving, Sam told me he was feeling lonely, so I volunteered to put something together for him. A four-to-six p.m., Sunday at-home in his apartment in the West Village was what he wanted, for the five of us housemates, plus a few of his other friends. And on the particular Sunday we settled on, a week before Christmas, it turned out that that timing was perfect to sync with the date I had made for seven that evening with the guy I’d been seeing, an actor named Alastair. I knew that Sam’s might be dismal, so I arranged to meet Alastair afterward.

“That’s the way it happens sometimes,” said Vincent, when I called him about the party. “You stay strong and with-it into your seventies or even eighties, then boom, you hit a wall or something. Rather than, you know, a gradual fade.” Vincent was the richest guy in our little circle, though he often told the story of his mom and him being homeless for several months when he was a kid. The year before, he’d allowed Sam to hold a dance company fundraiser for a hundred people at his sprawling Tribeca duplex—as much to populate his living room with hot dancer boys, I thought, as to support a fragile art form.

“He was doing so well in rehab,” I said. “But he’s still slurring words, getting confused by the simplest computer stuff.”

“Poor soul,” said Vincent.

“Then you can come? The others are coming.”

“Of course they’re coming. How could we say no? Sure, I’ll be there. It’s so nice of you to do this for him.”

I’d also repainted Sam’s bathroom, after he came home from rehab and discovered that a leak there had been sloppily repaired during his absence. Of the five of us, I was the one who stayed closest to Sam after the stroke. Automatically—but certainly not because I had any more time on my hands than the rest of us, to help with doctor visits and shopping errands—Sam and I shifted from the kind of casual, mutually respectful friendship that makes for good housemates at the beach to a care-partner level of companionship that I wasn’t prepared for but didn’t hate. It was simply new territory for an old buddy. He didn’t return my calls about final party arrangements, on the day before and the morning of the thing, which was typical; and he’d ignored all the menu suggestions I emailed him earlier in the week. Sam could find himself daunted these days by even tiny tasks, I knew, which frustrated and sometimes frightened him, and which dissolved any shortness I had in response to his lapses in an ocean of patience I was surprised to find growing within me. I’d never been a particularly patient person; in fact, I resist becoming one, since I associate my previous, well-documented habit of impatience in some way with the glory of youth and the privilege of a leadership position in a large media company. Yet here was Sam, once the owner of an elegant shop off Madison, now reduced to a slow decline that was probably permanent, which meant a different kind of relationship between him and his friends, him and life.

I arrived at his place that day around one and found him discarding the remains of a frozen burrito he’d microwaved for lunch—dismaying, as Sam had always loved to cook.
But I stayed cheerful and gave him the task of trimming the little tree I’d brought and set up in the living room. Desultorily he went about it, after the drama of locating the Christmas ornaments. Meanwhile, I did a quick spruce of the toilet bowl and bathroom sink, and concluded I couldn’t do much about the rest of the place, which was luxurious in an overstuffed 1980s way but never updated and now noticeably undusted. Sam hadn’t gotten around to replacing his cleaning lady, who’d chosen the moment of his stroke to retire. Around two I went out again, for the wine and nibbles. Is there a word for the love one feels for someone who’s no longer an equal, I wondered—“pity,” perhaps? That wasn’t the way I would frame the thought, if it came up later that day among the rest of us, but it was the way the thought hung in my mind as I went back out into the mess.

It was a gray and sleety day, the mien of which harmonized with the silvery décor of Sam’s building lobby—a pre-War Deco scheme that had been renovated in the ‘70s with a ‘70s idea about Deco. The West Village, too, was a tasteful renovation now, having evolved from a bohemian enclave that retained some spirit of the rural village it was two centuries before, to a domain for the comfy elite, complete with photo-spread homes and upscale boutiques. Gone from these blocks was all evidence of social protest and louche antics. Bleecker Street was now as decorous as Madison Avenue—the Christmas decorations in store windows as clever, the shoppers as blithe. Off-the-grid possibilities had moved out of the Village and, really, out of Manhattan. A plaque would be nice, I thought as I passed a luxury-brand bakery in whose doorway, late one night in a bygone summer, when the place was a mom-and-pop hardware store, I had received a monumental blowjob from a coked-up stranger. Inside, a couple of quilted-parka-clad gay men were selecting from a tray of colorful macarons while sipping complimentary champagne from crystal flutes.

Just as I got back to Sam’s place, Vincent texted for the address. I gave it to him once more. “What ru doing for new years, btw?” he added. “Am having a small party.” Since Vincent’s parties were often big and bouncy, I assumed “a small party” might mean twenty or thirty, which sounded like a nice, civilized idea for New Year’s Eve.

“Haven’t thought about it,” I texted back. “But any party of yours sounds like fun. Count me in.”

“Wonderful. 9 sharp. And look sharp as you always do.”

Luthor, TJ, and Robb arrived at four on the dot, not having to be told that the time was selected because it was when, during Sam’s day, he expected to have the most energy. Vincent came late, as if this were any old get-together—though he did bring with him a pretty box of macarons. And as good as it was to see everyone, and to meet the other guys whom Sam asked me to invite, the cheer felt a little pressure-cooked, since for most of the party we were all assembled in a clump in the living room, engaged in a single conversation, without an opportunity to break into little tête-à-têtes and small groups, the way parties usually did. It felt more like a meeting than anything else, or perhaps a viewing. We sat there trying to entertain Sam, and he, feebly, us. And for the five of us housemates, the gathering had the added resonance of a commemorative reunion, since we knew we’d never be together at the beach house again. Robb, from whom we rented the place, had had to sell it. A real estate deal had gone wrong for him, and he’d lost the better part of his capital. He’d moved from a splendid place in Chelsea, comprising two
apartments he bought and combined, to a second-story floor-through rental in Sunset Park, halfway to Bay Ridge.

Friends would remain friends, we all said, when the subject came up and we raised our glasses—and without heed for the other guests we binged for a moment on some Pines reminiscence: Sam’s morning trips to the Pantry for croissants and the Times; Doug’s welcome efforts to keep the towels freshly laundered; Vincent’s tendency to treat us housemates to expensive bottles of wine (and his tales of occasional visits to the dick dock between tea and dinner); TJ’s epic skills at the grill; my own willingness to get the dishes in and out of the dishwasher every day. I always thought our long summer weekends were a nice, modern-day version of “a house party of many guests,” as my great-grandmother, the Irish matriarch, my family’s own Rose Kennedy, might have put it. Ironically, she’d grown up in a big house not far from the Pines, across the sound on Long Island, where her emigrant family settled in 1849.

Actually, I was the one out there least likely to have or find a not-quite-boyfriend. My first season was right after Hudson left me; this was before the group gelled and the rental thing was established, and Robb invited me as a guest, to recuperate. But ours was never that kind of house. We were professional gay men who worked and cooked and read books by the pool, not party animals. Mornings were quiet, with people on their laptops; we joked that the dining table often looked like something from an Apple showroom. Afternoons meant the pool and the ocean, evenings meant a “look in” at tea and then dinner at home en groupe around eleven or midnight. Hardly ever did anyone, least of all me, bring someone home from tea or a party or something. The vibe was genial, even gracious—and for me, oh, it took years after Hudson for my spirit to right itself, so genial was all I wanted. Which is why my new crush, Alastair, has been so seismic. I wasn’t even physically attracted to him at first—which is the way it started between Hudson and me, and is also, of course, a distinctly un-Fire Island-like way of going about things. Alastair and I met at the reading of a mutual friend’s play, chatted afterward, and really hit it off. Attraction—wild attraction!—erupted only a few weeks later, with crazy energy. Neither of us knows where it’s going, but I think we both know it’s going somewhere.

Alastair texted me around five. “Rehearsal’s going late, sorry. Can we meet at 8, same place?”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Dinner’s on me.”

“Oh, goody!”

“Unless you want me to meet you at your friend’s thing.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you, darling. Tell ya why later. Meanwhile, we’re invited to my friend Vincent’s place on New Year’s Eve. I think you guys will like each other. He’s a corporate lawyer, but supports the arts.”

“Groovy.”

As the afternoon wore on, conversation moved from disability insurance to demographic changes in the city, to gay marriage—the latter which cued a round of pleasant clucking
about Vincent’s recent marriage to his boyfriend Emilio, whom he’d known for less than a year. There had been a small family wedding that none of us was invited to—odd, we thought, since Vincent loved to throw big parties with bartenders and waiters—and they’d honeymooned at a schloss on the Danube. Then Vincent surprised us all by saying he and Emilio were “pregnant with twins.” More congratulations, which were perhaps the more ardent for being unconnected to any idea leading back to a stroke. Vincent explained that he and Emilio had contracted with an agency to adopt two children to be birthed by surrogates. The newlyweds had met both women and liked them. Semen was commingled and exchanged. The conversation moved on after a word from Vincent about surrogacy law gave way to a round of thoughtful but silent nodding.

At which point I piped up with something stupid.

“So you’re assured you won’t have any post-partum harpies stalking up your driveway, demanding their spawn.”

“What do you mean?” said Vincent.

“Well, you keep hearing about these hormone-crazed girls who want their babies back.” I had just seen Baby Mama on television, but really, there was no excuse for such a tactless remark. Instantly I regretted it. These were Vincent’s children we were talking about, after all.

But he maintained what I thought was cheer, as TJ made a little joke about how much fun it was going to be for Vincent and Emilio to shop for baby clothes. Everyone laughed.

“I always wanted kids…,” said Sam, prompting another thud of silence. For years Sam was the alpha gay guy, defined by all things that connoted alpha in our world: money, good looks, great press—Vanity Fair had covered his sixty-fifth birthday. Now the idea of having kids was over for him, though he’d probably not put a lid on that box until forced to by our jolly little get-together. For the third time that day, talk turned to the yucky weather.

It was when I started to apologize to Vincent, a little later, in the kitchen, where he’d gone for a drink of water, that I realized I had truly displeased him—not by making a joke at the expense of his future children, but, I think, by implicitly challenging his legal expertise.

“I was completely out of line,” I said. “Really, I am most desperately sorry. I just didn’t know…. you know, this afternoon, with this get-together… what to say.”

“No worries,” said Vincent, coolly. “But I have gone over these risks with the agency. They’re the top people.”

“Of course. You and Emilio are so lucky,” I said, trying to steer the conversation in a positive direction. “Not only to have met and decided to take these great steps together, but the house and all….” Vincent had bought a house upstate the previous spring, and with astonishing speed redid it completely with a famous designer, including a nursery. He had also installed a swimming pool and landscaped terrace that were ready for use by July.

“Oh, yes, well…,” he said.
“Fatherhood is a very special thing.”

“That’s what Emilio keeps saying.”

“Who would have thought this possible for you, the star of the dick dock?” This last remark was not out of line, since I was always the one to whom Vincent felt most comfortable confessing his nastiest beach exploits.

“Well, sure…,” he said, with a trace of pride in a certain eminence that I suddenly realized he was trying to put behind him, now that he was a husband and father-to-be.

Then Vincent asked me how I was doing, and I told him about Alastair.

“I guess it’s as serious as anything,” I said. “I mean, I could even see us getting married. I guess. And you know better than the others what this means to me, because we’ve talked so much about it—that I was afraid it wasn’t going to happen for me again.”

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“Anyway, good for you,” said Vincent.

I was surprised that he didn’t want to know more about Alastair, but happy not to have to explain why I found this particular guy so great. I wasn’t sure why, myself! And there was the party to get back to. As Vincent and I stepped back into the living room I mentioned that I’d probably bring Alastair with me on New Year’s Eve.

The others were discussing the new Federal guidelines for Fire Island beach reconstruction as Vincent and I reseated ourselves, but soon it was clear the party was over. People started rising, talking about where they were going next, how much fun it was to get together, how great Sam was looking. And after a flurry of coats and hugs and promises to get together and admonitions to stay warm, the house was empty.

I cleaned up while chatting with Sam, who seemed happy but depleted. Then I went off to meet Alastair. He and I had a nice little dinner at a restaurant we like in Chelsea. I told him all about the party and how sad it was to see Sam in such a reduced state, but that I took solace in the fact that, until faced with the actual loss of my friend, I would remain focused on the new splendors that often take the place of old splendors that are lost. With that sly but sincere smile I have come to adore so much, and reaching across the table to take my hand, Alastair agreed.

It was just after I’d said goodnight to Alastair outside the subway station—we were going home that night in different directions—when Vincent texted me again.

It was good to see you, and Sam seems OK. We’re gonna catch up after the new year. Listen my New Years thing started as a dinner party and there’ll only be about 15 there all people I know very well. I was a bit surprised you planned to bring someone I don’t know. While happy for you to have a new love interest I think it would be better if you spend new year with your new man and let’s plan to get together properly after the 1st. We probably could talk about a lot of things.

Best

V

For a moment, I was stunned. I’d never been disinvited from a party before. I checked the original text, just to see if there was any explicit mention of dinner, as in sit-down, which would have caused me to pause and think carefully, with family matriarchs somewhere in
mind, about whether or not one was being invited as a “single man,” to balance out a table or something. Even now, I know several uptown ladies who operate this way, and they have their way of communicating such situations smoothly, using the right language. Yet Vincent had only said “a small party.” And then I remembered that, in parting Sam’s, Luthor said he and his new boyfriend were going to that party—apparently among the people whom Vincent knew “very well.” So why not me? I thought. Was this about my stupid remark? Had something made me less attractive as a friend or a guest?

I texted back.

Of course, of course, I didn’t realize it was to be quite so intime. Let’s get together after the turn of the year. Am off to LA for the holidays. Great to see you.

I had to chuckle. On one level, the disinvitation was comically clumsy. The bad manners of it, even its ham-handed phrasing, were quite out of sync with the gracious lifestyle that Vincent seemed bent on pursuing, with his fine wines and week-long stays in five-star relais and chateaux. On another level, I was disappointed that my buddy who’d recently landed the husband he’d long wanted was indifferent to my own significant step in that direction. Chats about the dick dock had often given way to girlish mooning about marriage; and—Jesus!—shouldn’t Vincent be excited that I’d found someone I deemed worthy of bringing to his damned home…?

The matter might simply admit no explanation, I realized. If I’m invited upstate next spring, we’ll see how things feel then. And if I’m not, well, no big deal.

Vincent texted back: “Wonderful we’ll pick a date. Enjoy LA.”

I stood there trying to compose a text to follow, just to keep things seemly, in case I had misunderstood something. But then I caught sight of a full-size, leather-clad Santa Claus, pictured in a copper tinsel-trimmed liquor store window, pouring premium scotch into a dog dish labeled “Fred”—and I suddenly felt ridiculous for trying to calibrate a breezy text message that my great-grandmother would approve of. Fuck breezy, I thought. So I scrapped the text and descended into the subway, careful not to slip on the ice.

Stephen Greco is the author of the novels *Now and Yesterday*, *Dreadnought*, *The Culling*, and *Other People’s Prayers*. His short stories have appeared in *Chelsea Station*, *Boyfriends From Hell*, *Queer and Catholic*, and several other anthologies, including volumes of the *Men On Men* and *Flesh and the Word* series. His first book, a collection of erotic fiction and non-fiction entitled *The Sperm Engine* was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.